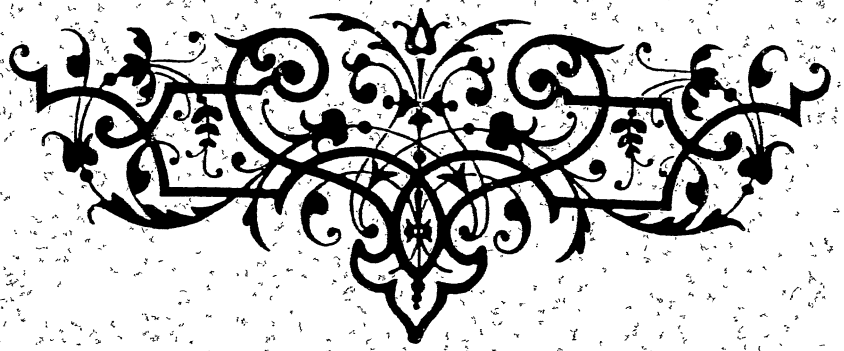
# Good Guys Wear Fangs



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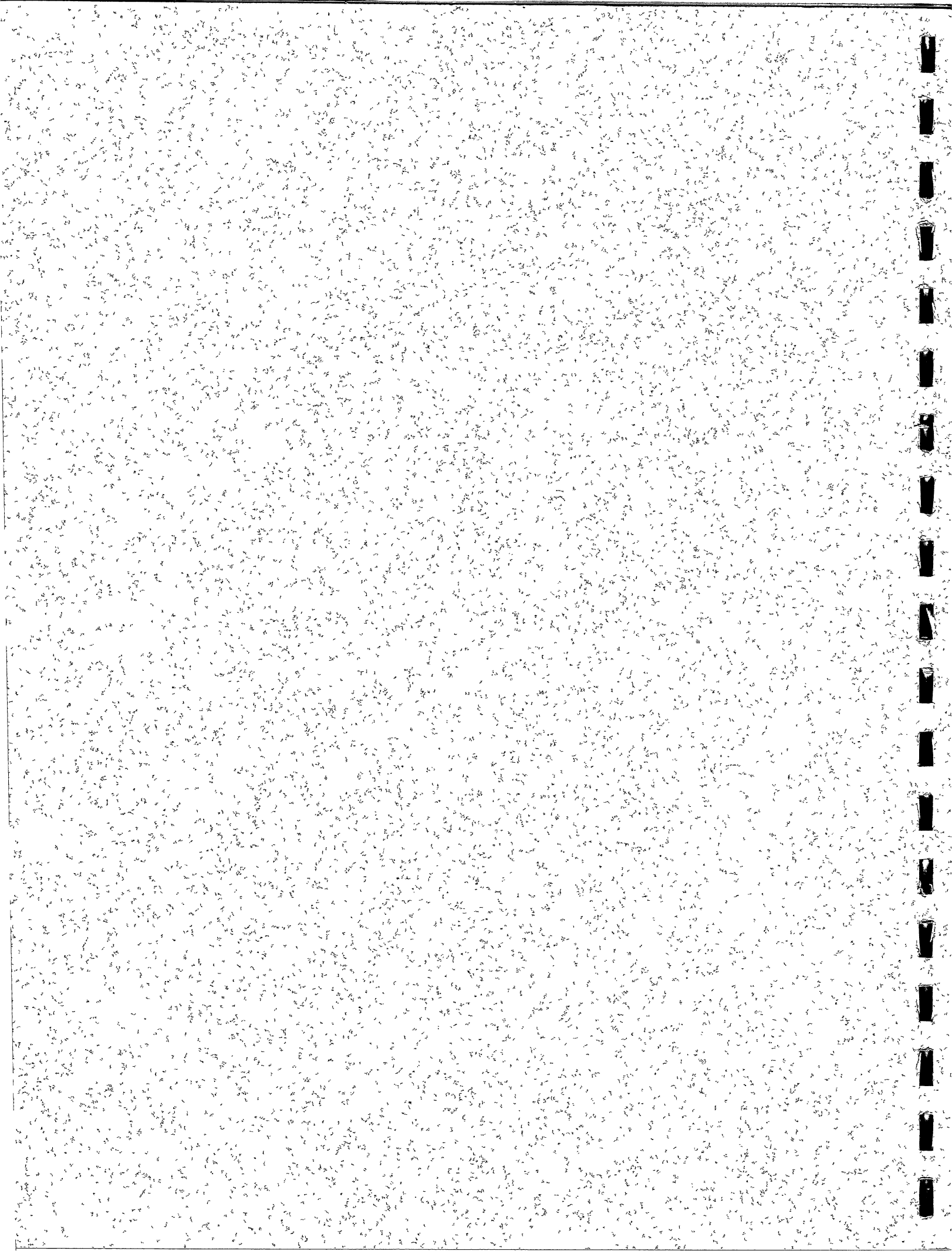

# Good Guys Wear Fangs

## *Volume 4*

**Edited by:**

*Mary Ann B. McKinnon*
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May 2005

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# From the Editor

*Dear Friends and Fans of "Good Guy" Vampires,*

*I can't believe what a long time it has been since the last issue of Good Guys Wear Fangs! "Forever Knight" ended, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Angel" came and went, and "Kindred the Embraced" and "Ultraviolet" made brief runs that I am sure all of us wished could have been much, much longer. In the movies, we have had the "Blade" series starring Wesley Snipes, and the dark and wonderful "Underworld," starring Kate Beckinsale, as well as the fulfillment of the dream of every fan of both "Highlander" and "good guy" vampires – Adrian Paul starring in "The Breed"!*

*Looking to the future, we have a new "Blade" tv series on the horizon – due out in early 2006, if all goes according to plan – and an upcoming sequel to the "Underworld" movie. Nothing like "Forever Knight" or the series that were a part of Joss Whedon's "Buffyverse," of course, but hopefully we will not go too long without a serious new "good guy" vampire show for us to love.*

*At any rate, this issue of Good Guys Wear Fangs, sticks to the basics.*

*Old favorite "Forever Knight" is here, both alone and in crossovers with the earlier "Nick Knight" pilot starring Rick Springfield, and the movie "Van Helsing, with stories from familiar authors Barbara Fish and Denysé Bridger.*

*Barbara, you may remember, has greatly enriched "good guy" vampire fan fiction with a long series of wonderful stories about the original Nick of "Nick Knight", "Starsky and Hutch" and an original vampire character based on the actor Michael Praed, who portrayed Robin Hood in "Robin of Sherwood." Some of her stories appeared in earlier issues of "Good Guys Wear Fangs" and some were published by Mysti Frank of "Agent With Style" Press.*

*Denysé, in addition to being an award-winning fan author for many years, is now a professional with a contract with Amber Quill Press – check out her author's website there at http://www.amberquill.com/bio_Bridger.html for a list of no less than sixteen books of romantic erotica, several of them dark vampire tales (The Hunt, Blood Wine and Pale Roses, , that are either currently available or coming soon. Congratulations, Denysé!*

*Margaret L. Carter, a professional author for many years, has provided us with two romantic vampire tales in her original universe "Vanishing Breed," plus a current look at the state of vampire fiction. She has been published by Hard Shell Word Factory, Ellora's Cave, and Amber Quill Press, and in 2000 won an Eppie Award (Eppie's recognize outstanding achievement in e-publishing) for one of her romantic tales.*

*Finally, we have an epic, earth shattering novella from Chris Kenworthy which gives the "Angel" series the ending it truly deserves. Once you start reading you won't be able to stop! Action, thrills, romance, it's all here. Chris has been writing stories, mostly science fiction and fantasy, since he was a young teenager, and has been published by a small Toronto sci-fi monthly which he has forgotten the name of. He began writing "Buffy" fiction in the summer of 1999, and completed a virtual season of the show. Chris would love to know what you thought about this tale; you can contact him at Chris_Kenworthy@yahoo.com.*

*So dive in and enjoy! And while you are at it, think about sending in stories, poems, or artwork for the next issue. (Contact me at ggwfzines@aol.com for guidelines.) You can write about your favorite media "good guy" vampire, create an entirely original vampire universe, or "vamp" the hero from your favorite tv series – in the past, we have had "MacGyver," "Miami Vice," "Star Trek," "Robin of Sherwood," "Starsky & Hutch," and "Quantum Leap, among others, represented within these pages.*

*A number of people have asked me about past issues. The plan is to put Volumes 1 – 3 back into print within the next few months, along with Z: The Zorro Zine, Immortal Tales ("Highlander") and "Turn of the Wheel" ("Robin of Sherwood"). Drop me a note if you would like to be notified when any of these become available.*

*Also, it has come to my attention that some authors or artists for Volume 3 may not have received their contributor's copy. If this happened to you, please let me know.*

*I have met some of my best friends through working on zines and attending cons, and one of my favorite things to do is to read a new story that comes to me by the electronic (or snailmail!) post, so I'm waxing a little nostalgic here that this volume is finally done. Now I can't wait to get started on the next one!*

*My Very Best Regards,*

*MaryAnn McKinnon, Editor*
*"Good Guys Wear Fangs"*

# Vamps for a New Millennium: The State of the Field in 2005

*by*
***Margaret L. Carter***

As of May 2004, Spike and Angel left our television screens for the eternal life of syndication and DVD collections. Fortunately, we can still encounter numerous vampire heroes and heroines in print and pixels. The late-twentieth-century trend of three-dimensional, often attractive and ethical vampires in fiction continues (although the backlash toward evil, bloodthirsty monsters fit only to be destroyed also lingers, especially in the movies). Interestingly, even when a vampire is portrayed as evil, he or she usually has a more complex, nuanced personality than comparable characters before 1970. The figure of the sympathetic vampire has altered the imaginative landscape so that readers and viewers apparently no longer want to accept a purely monstrous villain with no inner life. At the beginning of the first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I found the Buffyverse undead disappointing. They appeared to be caricatures of horror movie monsters, pure stake fodder with no individuality. The Master, to me, was quite an uninteresting villain. But then Angel appeared, a fascinating descendant of Barnabas Collins and Nick Knight. And in the second season, Spike and Drusilla showed us that even an unredeemed Buffyverse vampire can have a complex personality and some sympathetic traits. (For a varied assortment of reflections on these and other characters in the two series by writers who include many well-known authors of vampire fiction, check out the essay anthologies *Seven Seasons of Buffy* and *Five Seasons of Angel*, both published by BenBella Books. In the fiction section of the bookstore, Buffy and Angel paperbacks continue to be published, even though less copiously than before, with a "choose your own adventure" story structure for YA readers as the latest variation.) The classic "evil spawn of Satan" approach undergirds *Midnight Mass*, an outstanding new novel by F. Paul Wilson, author of the much more unconventional modern vampire classic *The Keep*. Even though Wilson explicitly states his intention to return to the traditional portrayal of vampires as loathsome parasites, *Midnight Mass* contains one undead character who retains his personality and his ethics, illustrating the increased complexity of character development prevalent in most contemporary vampire fiction.

Concerning vampires who begin unlife as apparently evil but become the protagonists of their own stories, Anne Rice's Lestat leads the pack, in longevity at least. Rice says she has finished with her Vampire Chronicles and is permanently moving on to other themes; this time, she may be serious. Despite his obvious allure for millions of readers, I have never accepted Lestat as "good." While he may have his own code of ethics, in terms of human concepts of good and evil he remains simply amoral. That distinction, of course, may be Rice's point; vampires, having passed through death into a new phase of existence beyond mortal understanding, have also passed beyond any need to adhere to human standards. I prefer the position taken by P. N.

Elrod, who frames her vampires as people with an unusual condition and special needs that do not absolve them from making ethical decisions and respecting the rights of others. Having completed her eighteenth-century Jonathan Barrett series, Elrod returned to the Vampire Files, starring Jack Fleming, with *Cold Streets* as the most recent novel. Tanya Huff portrays her vampires with similar moral constraints. After a long hiatus, Huff's Henry Fitzroy resurfaces in *Smoke and Shadows*. Vicki Nelson does not appear in this book. Instead, Tony, a minor character in the earlier novels, moves to the fore, as he and Henry combat an evil sorcerer from another dimension. The setting, a Canadian TV show about a vampire detective, produces an abundance of in-jokes about *Forever Knight*, with some references to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. No fan of TV vampires should miss this book. A sequel, *Smoke and Mirrors*, is imminent.

Moral ambiguity dominates Laurell K. Hamilton's long-running Anita Blake series. Jean-Claude is another vampire who first appeared to be a villain, or at least an antagonist whom the heroine could not trust. Gradually, he has become Anita's ally and lover. As readers of the series know, the relationship is complicated by the presence of a werewolf who also loves Anita and sometimes shares her bed. With each successive novel, Anita gains a wider range of powers and loses more of her grip on the distinction between good and evil. Her fear of becoming one of the monsters is a dominant theme of the series. From the beginning, these books featured heavy doses of violence. In the later novels, lengthy, explicit sexual encounters also began to dominate the action. Some readers feel this aspect overshadows the plots, which have become thinner as a result. I must admit that I have found some of Hamilton's recent novels tedious, and I confess I skipped to the end of the latest Anita Blake rather than reading it all the way through. Set in a similar world, an alternate present-day America in which supernatural creatures are publicly known to exist and have (at least to some extent) legal rights, the Sookie Stackhouse series by Charlaine Harris resembles Anita Blake's universe with a lighter touch. The characters in Sookie's little Southern community provide some touches of humor. Her situation, however, does not lack for serious peril, as she gets embroiled in the rivalries of vampires and shapeshifters, some moral, some purely bloodthirsty, and some in between, but all potentially dangerous. *Dead to the World* finds her on-and-off relationship with her vampire boyfriend growing still more complicated, and subsequent books introduce her to other kinds of inhuman beings. A similar alternate Earth where supernatural creatures have gone public, including one very interesting female vampire who figures as a major character, is introduced by Kim Harrison in *Dead Witch Walking*, also the beginning of a series.

Other authors have developed unusual approaches to the vampire mythos, for instance, Susan Sizemore with her "Laws of the Blood" series, which invents a complex subculture for the traditional undead. In *I Burn for You, I Thirst for You,* and *I Hunger for You,* Sizemore creates a different type of vampire, a humanoid species sharing the world with us and able to breed with human mates. Also in the vampire romance subgenre, Sherrilyn Kenyon and Christine Feehan have created unique vampire races and cultures. Feehan, like Sizemore, uses the increasingly popular concept of destined bondmates to unite vampire and human lovers. Meanwhile, long-established authors such as Nancy Gideon, Maggie Shayne, and Amanda Ashley continue to add to their respective vampire romance series. New author Debbie Raleigh follows in their footsteps in a Regency-era series beginning with *My Lord Vampire*.

For a wider supply of romantic vampire tales than the chain bookstores offer, check out the catalogue of small press ImaJinn Books (www.imajinnbooks.com), which specializes heavily in vampire and other paranormal romance. Small press Meisha Merlin has brought back Lee

Killough's vampire police detective, originally introduced in *Blood Hunt*, predating *Forever Knight*. And be sure to explore the realm of e-publishing. Internet-based publishers have known all along that readers thirst for sympathetic, alluring vampire characters and have kept supplying the demand while mass market publishers mistakenly assumed the market was dead (so to speak). Their faith has been vindicated by the republication of Mary Janice Davidson's *Undead and Unwed* as a Berkley paperback, followed by several sequels; this hilarious novel of a young woman who wakes up in a coffin and discovers that the local vampires want to anoint her their long-prophesied queen was first published by erotic romance e-publisher Ellora's Cave (www.ellorascave.com). If you like your vampire love stories steamy, you can find dozens of them at Ellora's Cave. Many other e-publishers offer an abundance of unique vampire fiction, such as Hard Shell Word Factory (www.hardshell.com), Amber Quill (www.amberquill.com), Liquid Silver (www.liquidsilver.com), and Novel Books (www.novelbooksinc.com). Award-winning science fiction vampire romance *Blood Will Tell,* by Jean Lorrah, was first published as an e-book before becoming a trade paperback. Lorrah, co-author with Jacqueline Lichtenberg of the classic Sime-Gen series (which contains some vampire-symbiosis resonance), has a Sime-Gen romance, *To Kiss or to Kill*, forthcoming from Meisha Merlin. Jacqueline Lichtenberg's science fiction "vampire as alien" novels *Those of My Blood* and *Dreamspy* have also been reprinted. Another trade paperback novel that first appeared as an e-book, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *In the Face of Death*, brings back her vampire heroine Madelaine, whom readers have eagerly awaited. Yarbro also continues to produce new Count Saint-Germain books. The romantic vampire trend her *Hotel Transylvania* pioneered in the 1970s has matured enough to indulge in gentle self-satire. I highly recommend the humorous vampire love stories of Lynsay Sands and Katie MacAlister. Sands' *Single White Vampire*, with a reclusive vampire author of paranormal romances unwillingly dragged to a romance convention, is an experience not to be missed. In addition to her adult series in the new subgenre that can only be called "vampire chic lit," MacAlister has written a similarly witty YA novel called *Got Fangs?* under the name of Katie Maxwell. More than ever before, our favorite bloodsuckers refuse to hide in their coffins!

End

[Margaret L. Carter has had vampire fiction published by the Hard Shell Word Factory (www.hardshell.com), Amber Quill Press (www.amberquill.com), and Ellora's Cave (www.ellorascave.com). Her *Dark Changeling* from Hard Shell won the Eppie Award (presented by EPIC, the Electronically Published Internet Connection) for Horror in 2000, and its sequel, *Child of Twilight*, was a finalist for the Eppie in Horror in 2004. Amber Quill recently published her *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien,* a nonfiction survey of vampires as a naturally evolved species in stories and novels from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1990s. Her vampire romance *Embracing Darkness* was published by Silhouette in March 2005. See her website at www.margaretlcarter.com.]

# the vampyre's kiss

by

*Denysé M. Bridger*

**image**
**a flicker of white breaks the colourless night**
**glimmer**
**flashes of blinding silver radiance**
**rapid**
**gone so quickly i am left gasping, breathless**
**wonder**
**the air moves around me, caresses flushed skin**
**shudders**
**ripple my spine, promises unspoken, imagined**
**kiss**
**death has touched my lips, awakened life**
**possession**
**an eruption of fire within the bleakness**
**chill**
**the shadow retreats, gone on the breeze**
**alone**
**soul claimed and returned**
**nothing**
**has changed**

# Payer of Tribute

*by*

***Margaret L. Carter***

*[**Editor's Note**: "Payer of Tribute" originally appeared in 1989 as a chapbook released by Baker Street Publications. It is reprinted here with permission of the author. To me, it fills the niche of "quintessential" vampire story. Enjoy!]*

**While her sister Alison was taken** to the crossroads near the keep, Isobel lay on her attic bed, convulsed by tears of helpless grief and rage. Their widowed father, the miller, had forbidden Isobel to follow Alison to her tryst with death. By rigid custom, only the curate and the head of the council were permitted as escort. For six years the Demon had laired in the keep, and fourteen maidens had been offered as tribute to appease him. The Demon's messenger — an unkempt outlaw of the forest — had just brought a demand for fresh tribute (the season of such demands could not be predicted), and the oracle had named Alison.

Isobel's fists flailed her goosedown pillow in frustration at the injustice. Not only had her father refused to plead for his younger child's life, even Alison's, betrothed, Robert Smith's son, had not spoken up for his love. Within a few weeks, just past Eastertide, Alison would have been his wife and out of danger, for only virgins were taken . Moreover, unknown to all but Robert and Isobel, Alison already carried her lover's child and was thus ineligible. And while both Alison and Robert dithered over whether to proclaim this fact, the deed was done. Alison self-forgetfully (and stupidly, Isobel thought) pointed out that if she announced her disqualification, the whole town would have to endure the terror of selection again. Again the curate's elder sister — a scrawny, sallow woman subject to the falling sickness — would be displayed in church in sight of the whole village. Again she would be cast into trance — by the finger of God, so the curate claimed — and howl out a single name. Always the name of a healthy maiden. After six years of tribute, marriageable girls were growing scarce. Every parent of daughters lived under a cloud of fear, and weddings of near-children were becoming frequent.

Even Isobel — too tall and too dark as she was — had received an offer. But she knew well that the councilor's son who sought her wanted only her dowry, not her person, and Matthew the miller supported her refusal, apparently confident that his prosperity would shield him from ill fortune. Now his household, like those sheltered by wattle-and-daub instead of oaken beams, knew sorrow. Sometimes Isobel thought the town and countryside had been better off beneath the scourge of the bandits the Demon had displaced.

Before she was born, the last Baron had died, and the Duke, in his distant seat, had not seen fit to grant the keep to a new vassal. After years of vacancy, an outlaw band had made the keep its stronghold and had ravaged what remained of the region's wealth. Isolated as they were, the townspeople could not successfully appeal to their overlord. Such a small, poor holding was not worth the sending of armsmen. What little trade had still flowed down the river had dried up, and the forest had become a

haunt of terror. Then, six years ago, the village had awakened to find the bandit leader's corpse lying in the square, a parchment pinned to his chest with a dagger, his throat torn open.

The message read by the village curate had announced the annihilation of the outlaws and the advent of a new lord who would protect the village against all violence. He had only one condition — the payment of a young woman as tribute upon request. The first demand had been ignored. A few nights later, a girl had been walking home from her married cousin's house after sunset. The maiden had been snatched up by a dark, winged shape. Almost a month had passed before she was returned, dead, her throat savaged like the outlaw's. Soon afterward the curate had brought forward his sister, Janet, hitherto seldom seen out of doors, with the news that she had received a revelation from Heaven. Eagerly the town council had seized at this solution to the problem of whom to offer. Since then the village had lived at peace, except for the sacrifice of young girls, and had even regained some of its former prosperity.

If only, thought Isobel, the choice had fallen on her instead of Alison. Isobel had flown into hysterics and offered herself in her sister's place, only to be told by her alarmed father that Heaven must be obeyed, or something worse would befall them. And at sunset Alison was dragged to the tree at the crossroads of the half-overgrown path to the keep, now unused but for this purpose. Once over her initial frenzy of anguish, Isobel had schooled herself to outward calm, Sensible reflection told her that otherwise her father might lock her in. Now she wept alone, quietly, stifling the shrieks that threatened to burst forth, nursing her plans.

As the first gray specter of a still distant dawn smudged the horizon, she crept down from her gabled room. In the master bedroom her father slept at last. Isobel groped her way to the stable and the family's one saddle horse, a mare who had carried her for many years. The beast submitted to being saddled in darkness and accepted Isobel's weight without a betraying whinny. Her skin crawling at the delay. Isobel forced herself to hold her mount to a walking pace in town. Once on the narrow dirt road to the keep, she urged the mare to a trot. When the crossroad came in sight, she stopped and dismounted under the concealment of the trees.

Alison's slight form hung motionless, the hands tethered to a low branch. Her wheat-colored hair, unbound for the sacrifice, concealed her face. Doubtless she had fainted, for she was a home-loving girl of timid disposition. Isobel suspected that Alison's refusal to proclaim her pregnancy had less to do with courage in the face of death than with short-sighted fear of scandal. But this was no moment to do her sister an injustice, even in thought.

Whatever Alison's motives, she would certainly not stand by and let Isobel replace her. Now that the moment was at hand, the older girl stood at a loss how to carry out her resolve. As she hesitated, some movement impelled her to look up. She barely kept herself from gasping aloud.

High above, a form like a winged man was gliding through the sky. It swooped down to Alison's side. From beneath a full-length cloak it drew what looked like a dagger. Was Alison to die on the spot? Instead, the Demon slashed the thongs that bound her to the tree limb. She slumped into its arms. Carrying her, it walked a few paces into the open, then soared upward on the wind. The Demon and its victim disappeared in the direction of the keep.

As soon as the pair were concealed by the overhanging foliage, Isobel woke from her stupor. She leaped to the mare's back and galloped up the road toward the castle. By the time she reached the hillock where the keep loomed, the eastern sky was lightening. and there was no sign of those she sought. Dismounting, she ran to the gates.

At once she saw that the large central portal was long unused, its hinges rusting, vines overgrowing it. She tried the postern gate to one side, marked by a well-trodden footpath. It was locked. She screamed until her throat was raw, pounded until the sun was fully risen. Exhaustion finally brought her to herself. Tethering the mare, she slouched against the stone wall to wait. Perhaps the Demon, as befitted his satanic origin, could not face the light of day. If so, Alison would perhaps be allowed to live until sundown. And then the Demon would hear Isobel's cry for admittance.

All day she alternately paced alongside the wall and slumped on the ground in a half-conscious daze. Hunger and thirst grew upon her, but she was too distraught to seek food or water. The one thing she did not fear was a search from the village. Her fellow-townsfolk were too much in awe of the Demon to

approach his lair.

Twilight found her half-dozing next to the gate. A nervous whicker from the mare jerked Isobel awake. Had she missed her chance? She flung herself at the gate, screaming Alison's name. The horse strained at the rope. Isobel paused, listening for what may have alarmed the animal. She heard quick strides crossing the courtyard.

"Lord Demon!" she cried. "Let me in! I must talk to you!"

The steps halted on the other side of the gate. A moment of silence. Then the portal was flung wide. Isobel swallowed a lump of terror and stepped in. She saw, barely visible by the crescent moon, twisted trees showing only buds on their naked branches. She saw no living form among the shadows, yet her skin prickled as if eyes were crawling over her. "Who's there?" she whispered. "Where are you?"

A denser shade detached itself from the shadows. It melted from a patch of blackness into the shape of a black-cloaked, hooded man. No wings were visible. The hood obscured his face, of which Isobel saw only a pair of glowing eyes.

"Lord Demon?"

"What do you want here, girl? The tribute has already been delivered." His voice was deep and resonant but outwardly human.

Isobel's control broke. She collapsed on the bare earth, screaming, "My sister! Alison! You've killed her! Say you haven't killed her!"

The Demon waited in motionless indifference until the spasm wore itself out. "If you mean the sickly wench left for me last night," he said, "she is yet untouched. I dine only after dark. What is the purpose of this intrusion?"

Isobel pulled herself to her feet. The Demon, arms folded, raked her up and down with his burning eyes. "Forgive me, Lord Demon," she said. "I'm here to offer myself in my sister's place. There has been a mistake — she's no virgin. She is with child."

"What of it? Why should the status of her maidenhead hold any interest for me?"

Isobel's heart sank. If the virginity condition was meaningless, how could she persuade the Demon to accept her as substitute? She gathered her wits. "Alison, as you said, is but a poor creature. She'll either swoon with fear or throw a mad fit when you touch her. But I'll give you no trouble. I vow to obey your every commend without hesitation."

He stood silent for so long that she feared she'd chosen the wrong strategy. Perhaps he enjoyed resistance in his prey, like the stable cat toying with a mouse. Finally he said, "I daresay you would indeed be more amusing than the other one. What makes you think I wouldn't simply take you and keep your sister as well?"

She drew a long, shaky breath. "From all I've heard, you are an honorable demon."

He emitted a sound very like a laugh. "And are you an 'honorable' victim? Yes, I do believe you mean to keep your bargain." He held out a gloved hand. "Come here."

She hesitated only a second before placing her hand in his. She felt a grip like animate stone. Whatever nameless violence she'd expected, all he did was draw her into the shelter of the skeletal trees. "Wait here and see your sister released," he said. "If you remain still, you'll not be noticed."

"One thing, Lord Demon," she whispered. His stare seemed to reprove her boldness. "Alison mustn't know why she is being sent away. Tell her it's because she isn't a virgin. She will believe that."

After a moment's pause, he nodded, then vanished into the keep. Isobel waited, shivering, though the night was no more than cool. At length the cloaked form of the Demon emerged, supporting Alison with one arm. The girl stumbled, dragging her feet as if hardly able to move. She did not speak as the Demon led her to the gate. After they passed through, Isobel heard a mare's high-pitched squeal, quelled by a commanding word from the Demon, followed by the rustle of saddle and reins as Allison was lifted into her seat. A muffled slap, and the horse trotted away.

Isobel let out a grateful sigh. For that moment her own fate mattered less than nothing. That state of numb acceptance, though, lasted only until the Demon reappeared at her side. Again he reached for her. At the memory of that implacable grasp, panic surged through her limbs. She darted for the gate.

One moment he was beside her among the trees. The next, with no sense of motion, he was standing

between her and the open portal. With folded arms he blocked her path. "Is this how you keep your word?"

She gulped down her fear and gazed up at his looming height. "Forgive me, Lord Demon. It shall not happen again."

He walked around her and started across the courtyard. "Come," he said, disdaining to look back. She followed him. She trailed behind him along the twisting length of dusty corridors lit only by widely spaced candles on the walls. Often she had to grope in near-darkness, her fingers skimming the clammy stone. At length the Demon led her into a small chamber, hung all round with tapestries. Isobel noted the bizarre undulations of the faded pictures of fabulous beasts in the guttering light of a single torch. From a few slits near the ceiling blew a chill draft. The only furniture was a low divan. She sank onto it.

The Demon threw back the hood of his cloak. He bore the shape of a tall, pale man with black hair curling down the back of his neck. The only definitely nonhuman feature was the eye color — silvery gray, their glow reduced to crimson dots in the centers. He bared his teeth briefly (she could not call that grimace a smile); the teeth looked a little sharper than normal. He removed his gloves and flung them on the couch beside her. The hands, she saw, were human, though the nails were long and clawlike.

He bent over her. She flinched away. He straightened up, took a step back. "Remember your bargain."

Isobel got to her feet and defiantly faced him. "Devour me, then, and have done with it."

For the first time she saw an expression other than cold contempt on his face. "God's death, girl, is *that* what you think?" (A strange demon, she thought, to speak the holy Name.) "I'm no eater of human flesh — if I were, your village would be long since unpeopled. Ah, no, I do not mean for you to die for many months. The longer you live, the better I'll be pleased." His claws dug into her upper arms. "You are the most appetizing prey I've had in many a year."

Blackness descended upon her. A momentary needle-like pain stabbed her, and she sank into oblivion.

* * *

Isobel woke, half astonished to find herself still alive. High slits of windows in stone brought the slanted light of mid-morning to her eyes. Her neck felt sore, her throat parched and raw. All her limbs ached. When she tried to move an arm, at first her muscles would not stir. Inch by inch, she forced each arm and leg to creep across the surface she lay on. After a while she managed to sit up. Her head spun.

When her eyes cleared, she saw that she was in a small chamber almost filled by the wide bed on which she had awakened. Crimson brocade covered it, and fur rugs softened the chill of the polished stone floor. Next to the bed, on either side, stood small marble-topped tables, and a chest at the foot of it. On the table nearest her were two decanters, one filled with water and the other with red wine, and a silver tray of bread, cheese, and fruit. The other table held a stoneware bowl and pitcher, along with several linen cloths.

Here was support for the Demon's claim that he wanted her to live; he was feeding her.

She got painfully to her feet and wandered around the room. By standing on tiptoe she could barely see out the tall, narrow windows; she seemed to be in a tower room jutting out from a corner of the keep. Each window, she was glad to see, was provided with a shutter for protection against rain or cold. A pair of oil lamps hung on wall sconces, and she discovered flint and steel on a ledge. A well-equipped prison, she told herself listlessly. Hunger and thirst burned in her vitals, yet she could hardly summon the strength to fill a goblet or pick up an apple.

At length she ate and drank, gradually rising out of her apathetic stupor. Opening the chest, she found gowns, shifts, and other clothing in assorted sizes. Her throat tightened with revulsion at the thought of all the dead girls who had worn these things. But the clothes were clean, her own rumpled and sweat-stained. She washed and dressed without caring what she put on, so long as it fit.

The room had two doors. The smaller led to a privy arrangement over a shaft that dropped into the darkness below. The larger, heavier door opened into the corridor. She was surprised to find it

unlocked. Did the Demon trust her word so readily? Or was he so unused to being defied?

Isobel stepped into the hall. For what might have been hours she wandered bare corridors and empty rooms. Dust and cobwebs coated all the chambers but her own. The few pieces of furniture in odd corners were broken or worm-eaten. She found her way to the tapestried cubicle where the Demon had first brought her; so far, it was the only exception to the general decay. She began to think she was roaming in circles, visiting the same rooms over and over, but in the uniform dreariness of the place she could not be sure.

At length she returned to the bedchamber and nibbled a chunk of the bread, now dry in her mouth. Why, she wondered, did she bother to eat? She was effectively dead already. Her existence was not life. but an open-eyed nightmare to be blessedly ended by the true death. Yet she dared not seek that end. As long as she remained in this half-life — and continued to please the Demon — her fellow-townsfolk would be safe from any further demands for tribute. Whatever the Demon commanded she must fulfill. After all, it mattered not what one did or suffered in a dream.

She stretched on the bed and fell asleep.

Isobel snapped abruptly into wakefulness to find the room dim with the shadows of twilight. What had wakened her was the sound of booted feet. The door opened, and the Demon strode into the room.

"Get up," he said.

"Yes, Lord Demon." She sat on the edge of the bed, warily watching him as he towered over her, arms folded across his chest.

"What is your name, girl?"

"Isobel, my lord."

He sat down next to her. She had to hold her breath to keep from cringing away from him. "Tell me, Isobel, why do you count your life of so little worth that you were ready to throw it away for your sister?"

"I told you, Lord Demon, she's betrothed and with child."

"And what of you? Someday you, too, might be wife and mother."

She answered with a bitter laugh, "I? I am not comely. The only man who ever offered for me wanted my father's coin, not my person."

"Not comely? The men of this country must have odd notions of beauty."

"You mock me, Lord Demon." Somehow she no longer feared speaking up to him; realization that she was dead already, and nothing worse could befall her, armored her in the boldness of indifference. "Even you can see that I am too tall and too dark."

He said. with a trace of irritation, "Nonsense, you are precisely the correct height, and your hair is the color of a moonless night sky."

"No one could choose me after seeing Alison."

"I did," he said with a coldness that stripped the words of all flattery. "I've gone hungry for a very long time since the last tribute, and you satisfy me well."

"Why did you not ask for another maiden before now?" Hearing what she'd said, Isobel was appalled at herself, but she did not want to make matters worse by adding to the question.

"I'd be a fool to spoil such a rich field by over-hunting," he said. "Enough of this — I am hungry now." He pushed her back onto the pillow. Her skin crept at the cold grip of his fingers. She schooled herself to lie passive as he descended upon her. Again she felt a single sharp pain, with a hint of sweetness in the sharpness, and drowned in darkness.

* * *

She woke feeling very weak, but with little of the ache she'd suffered the day before. After eating and washing she felt well enough to be restless at sitting alone in the bedchamber. She tidied the room as well as she could, braided her hair (using a silver comb and mirror she found in the chest), and sallied forth to explore the keep further.

Less dazed this time, she managed to maintain a straight path until she found her way to the main door by which she had entered. Discovering it unbolted, she emerged into the courtyard. The trees,

bare except for a few pale green shoots, thrust against a gray sky. Isobel noticed a number of flowers and shrubs, rambling and unkempt, but still struggling to bloom. Walking across the courtyard, she checked the postern gate. It was bolted on the inside, the bolt locked.

If the Demon indeed hid from the sun by day, it would be no hard matter — over an endless series of weary days — to search the castle until she unearthed the key. Or perhaps a determined climber could use one of those trees as a scaling-ladder for the ten-foot wall. Isobel, the elder child of a widower, brought up almost like a lad, saw that as no great task. Escaping from the keep, should she wish to do so, would not be impossible.

But she could not think of escape. If she succeeded, the Demon would doubtlessly wreak some bloody vengeance on her village. She must keep her word.

She turned away from the gate and strolled about the courtyard. The weed-choked remains of what had been a garden continually drew her eyes. That climbing rose would bloom more lushly if tied up to the tree beside it. And wasn't that herb bed smothered under those wiry grasses? With a sniff of annoyance she sank to her knees and began digging at the roots of the weeds.

Hours later, the lengthening shadows drew her eyes to the purple horizon. She straightened up, her back cramped, her fingernails black with soil. She had forgotten where she was, had worked as if in her father's kitchen garden. Despite her sore muscles, she felt almost alive.

Back in her room, she washed thoroughly and changed into a fresh robe. After eating. she lit lamps and sat waiting. This time he would not catch her unaware.

Shortly after full dark he appeared at the door. She stood up to greet him. "Good evening, Lord Demon."

She stood her ground as he crossed the room to her side, though not moving was an effort. Though she didn't mind talking to him, she still feared his touch.

His glowing eyes surveyed her. "Very good. Your heart is pounding with fear, yet you don't flinch from me." To her surprise he sat down on the lid of the chest and said, "Talk to me."

"What, my lord?"

"I have a fancy to hear your voice. Come, Isobel, tell me of this imbecile youth who preferred your dowry over your body."

Still half-certain he was mocking her, she nevertheless talked willingly — anything to postpone that terrible fall into nothingness. She gave a full account of the councilor's son and his negotiations with her father, and how the miller had finally said he preferred to keep Isobel home to manage his household and his account books. She told of the betrothal between Robert and Alison, and of the annex Robert was building on his father's house in anticipation of the marriage. She talked of the neighbors' quirks and recalled the rare occasions when she had left the village to attend the market town with other girls and their parents. When she had exhausted all she cared to remember at this time, and her throat grew hoarse, she was sure the Demon would attack.

Instead he said, "I was a trifle late coming to you tonight because I have been hunting. In the kitchen below you'll find a haunch of venison, if you care to cook for yourself."

"Why would you hunt deer?" she asked. "You don't eat the flesh of beasts, do you?"

"No," he said. "I live upon the milk and blood of animals — including human animals," he finished with an ironic little bow.

She stared at him in an astonishment that temporarily wiped out fear. "Blood? Is that what you take from me?"

"Didn't you know?"

"How could I know, Lord Demon? You have thrown me into a swoon each time."

"I thought to spare you fear," he said, in a tone wholly devoid of kindness.

She lifted her chin defiantly. "Not knowing is the greater fear."

"Very well, then. If you can refrain from flying into a fit of the vapors when I touch you, I'll allow you to remain awake henceforth."

"I've vowed to obey you without resistance, my lord," she said. "Besides, what happens to me here is only a nightmare in the moment before death. Since I'm already doomed, none of this is real. Why

should I care what is done to me in a dream?"

"A dream, is it?" he laughed sardonically. "Who is the dreamer, you or I?" He directed her to lie down.

She obeyed, fighting to breathe slowly and steadily, giving him no excuse to call her weak and vaporish. When he reclined across her body, for a moment she was sure he meant to ravish her. Perhaps that was why he cared nothing for virginity; he planned to violate it anyway. But he made no move to disrobe her. His burning eyes held her immobile as with one hand he caressed her throat. His fingers, cold as they were, somehow seemed to scorch her flesh. His lips on her face and neck felt like liquid fire.

When he tilted her chin to kiss her just below the jawline, her throat muscles involuntarily tightened. He drew back. "Why do you fight me? You are causing yourself pain. Lie still, relax, and you'll not be hurt."

She forced herself to abandon control, go limp as his touch invited her to. When his fangs pierced her skin, she felt the wound, but not as pain. A tingling heat spread from the point of contact throughout her body. She felt as if she were floating, and when he spoke again, his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Do you wish to sleep now?" he was asking.

Isobel could barely summon the strength to murmur assent. The Demon's hands wandered over her body, soothing her into unconsciousness.

* * *

During the next few weeks Isobel's existence fell into an unvarying pattern. She woke late each morning and, after eating from the food that was always replenished while she slept, walked in the courtyard. Each day she tended the overgrown garden, freeing the hardy but neglected plants from the parasites that plagued them. The herb garden, in particular, yielded foliage useful for seasoning, and some of the fruit trees showed buds that promised an autumn crop. In the afternoon she hacked away at the monumental task of cleaning the kitchen. If the Demon had left any game for her, she cooked it and ate at the long wooden table, rather than in the confines of her room.

At twilight she changed into a fresh gown and awaited the Demon. He came to her room without fail soon after sunset. Each evening they conversed for increasingly long periods of time. Isobel became so weary of solitude that she welcomed the sound of a voice, even a monster's. Once she'd learned the full extent of his preying on her, she no longer feared it. She viewed the fiery-cold kisses as merely an unpleasant necessity of this dream-life. She no longer suffered the soreness and exhaustion of those first two days

She dared to question him more boldly, one night going so far as to ask what had become of the other girls.

"Dead," he said flatly. "Some sickened of fever; two fell in trying to climb the wall; a few ceased eating and starved themselves; three loathed my touch so strongly they cut their own throats. One managed to escape, and I heard no more of her."

Nor had her family heard of her, thought Isobel with a shudder. "Then you didn't kill them by design?"

"Not at all," he said impatiently. "I wanted them to live."

Another evening, he ordered her to walk outside with him. As they made the circuit of the courtyard, she noticed his glance ranging over the trees, shrubs, and flower beds. "I see you've been at work here," he remarked. "Why?"

Isobel shrugged indifferently. "I cannot sleep and eat all day, Lord Demon."

"It has the look of a garden again — much pleasanter thus," he said. "But see that you go veiled. Little by little my touch will make you vulnerable to the sun, so that too much daylight will make you ill."

"Would the sun kill you, my lord?"

He laughed, "No such good fortune for you; I'm not so easily dispatched. But more than a few minutes of daylight causes me severe pain." He looked her over with an unaccustomed show of interest.

"Idleness frets you, does it?"

"I've never been used to doing nothing."

"I recall your saying you've always done your father's accounts. You can read, then?"

"Somewhat," she said. "He brought me up much like a boy."

"Come along," the Demon ordered, abruptly turning toward the inner door. He conducted her along a passageway she hadn't yet found on her own. The chamber he showed her was a long gallery, amply lit by both lamps and windows, lined with several rows of shelves. Two small tables with matching chairs occupied the far end of the room.

The shelves were stacked high with books, both scrolls and bound volumes. Isobel had not imagined so many existed in the world. In fact, the only real book she had seen before was the huge leather-bound Bible chained to the lectern of the village church.

"Do you read any language besides English?" asked the Demon.

"A smattering of French, enough for a merchant's use," she said.

"No Latin, of course." He took an octavo volume from a nearby shelf and read aloud: *"Idaeo quales fudit de vertice flores, terra parens, cum me concesso junxit amori. . ."* After reading the whole poem, he translated for her — a lyric about the pagan god Jove dallying with the Earth-goddess on a flower-strewn mountaintop. It seemed strange to hear a night-creature declaiming lines about spring and sunshine. He then found a collection of French verses for Isobel to try her skill on. With surprising patience, he corrected her when she stumbled.

At least two hours passed before he shelved the last of several books, and said, "You may come here whenever you wish. I should like to hear you read again. I shall leave you now — I trust you can find your own way back to your bedchamber?"

She nodded dumbly. On no other night had he left without drinking from her veins. She collected herself to say, "Good night, Lord Demon."

Already at the doorway, he paused to stare at her. "I do have a name, you know."

She remained silent, not certain she wanted that knowledge.

"Call me Reynard."

"Yes, Lord Reynard."

"No titles," he said. "You have said yourself, this is only a nightmare. There are no distinctions of rank in dreams." And he was gone.

As she walked slowly back to her room, Isobel caught herself feeling a certain wistfulness. Only as she was sinking toward sleep did she realize, with horrified shame, that she was regretting that he hadn't touched her.

* * *

On the following night Reynard left his visit until so late that Isobel had decided he must not be coming. She was considering lying down to sleep when he flung the door open and strode into the room. His eyes glowed with inexplicable anger. He curtly ordered her to undress.

The unprecedented demand stunned her. She backed away from him, shaking her head.

"I have not had to remind you of your vow in many nights."

"Forgive me, Lord Reynard."

"I told you — no titles." His voice was harsh.

Slowly, fumbling, she unfastened her gown and stepped out of it. He watched, motionless, as she pulled her shift over her head and lay down. This is only a dream, she told herself once more. Whatever he does can do me no more harm. Yet she was certain he intended to ravish her now. She imagined his crushing weight on her chest, the piercing cold stabbing deep into her vitals. Could she remain in a detached dream-state through all that?

Her certainty solidified when he stripped to the waist. She bit her lip to keep from flinching or crying out when he lay across her. His lean, muscular chest was hairless; otherwise he appeared human in that respect, too. Was he true man below the waist as well? She'd heard it whispered that the Devil's sexual

organ had the form of a serpent.

But her fears were not confirmed. His clawed hands gripped her shoulders, and he said in a tone somewhere between rage and pain, "I am cold — cold to the heart. I must have your warmth." He laid his head on her breast, his parted lips pressed to her skin, but without attacking. Her fear evaporated. If this was all he asked, it was little enough. She hesitantly touched his hair, then drew back in shock at her own boldness.

"Put your arms around me," he ordered.

She obeyed. His embrace tightened convulsively; her chest ached with the pressure, and his nails were digging into her shoulders. "My lord — Reynard — you hurt me," she whispered. Not expecting her complaint to have any effect, she was surprised when he relaxed his grip and shifted a portion of his weight off her. Still the cold of his flesh seemed to seep into hers, causing weakness to spread through her limbs. He was drawing the heat from her body, just as he usually drew blood.

Suddenly she was astonished to see a pair of wings unfurl from his back. Pale green and veined like moth wings, they spread as wide as he was tall. She gasped at their delicate beauty — not what she would have expected of a demon. Isobel's hands crept irresistibly toward them, tentatively touching, then stroking the silky surface. Reynard's breath came rough and shallow through clenched teeth. She felt the heat of his lips on her breast, then on her neck.

"I did not intend to drink from you this night," he said hoarsely. Not fully understanding, she did not answer, but silently continued her caresses. With a sound strangely like a sob, he pierced her throat. Liquid fire raced through her veins. She clung to him, crying in ecstasy, as her life flowed into him.

When his thirst was quenched, he drew back, gazing down at her. Through half-closed eyes she saw him licking crimson droplets from his lips. A moan of self-loathing tore from her. She had welcomed his embrace — rejoiced in it! Was she damned?

Reynard's expression hardened as he took in her revulsion. In a swift movement like the striking of a snake, he slashed his own wrists with his teeth. Before Isobel could gather her wits to turn away, he pressed the open wound against her mouth. She strained and thrashed, struggling to turn her head, but she had no hope against his strength. He pinned her beneath him, until she felt she must suffocate.

"Drink, damn you — drink!"

A nightmare, she reminded herself. Only a dream. She went limp and did as he commanded. The taste was not nauseating, as she'd expected; it was no different from the saltiness of her own blood when she'd fallen, in childhood, and cut her lip. After a couple of minutes he released her. Inside her own mind she felt his anger and his triumph at her submission.

"Now Isobel," he said as he stood up and gathered his garments, "your soul as well as your body belongs to me. I can ravish your thoughts whenever I like. If I choose, henceforth you shall have no will of your own." And he was gone.

After a night and a day of shamed self-torment, Isobel was puzzled and somewhat annoyed when Reynard, upon his next visit, made no allusion to the night before. They toured the garden together and read to each other in the library as if nothing had changed. Yet in the occasional silences she felt the probing of his thoughts inside her mind, like the legs of some creeping insect. He sent her away without touching her, but she felt his presence until sleep engulfed her.

* * *

During the several days that followed, she grew accustomed to that mental touch, until it no longer disgusted her. It was simply there, a constant companion between the hours of sunset and dawn. Contrary to his threat, he did not use the bond to torture her. She almost came to welcome the inner sense that warned her he was approaching.

One night in the library he opened a casket of polished wood and showed her a treasure she had not seen before, a massive Bible with vellum pages illuminated in gold foil. She hardly dared touch the leaves, as if her hands were too coarsened by the mundane work to be worthy. She watched curiously as

he ran his fingertips over the intricately-wrought trees, serpents, cherubim, and other embellishments. "You are a strange Demon," she said, "to be able to handle this Book."

"That is your name for me, not my own," he said.

"What do you call your kind, then?" she asked.

Raising his eyes from the volume, he gazed into nothingness. "I've been so long apart from others like me, it is as if I have no kin, " he mused. "I am what the Creator made me, and I live as I must." He leafed back to the beginning of the Bible and translated, "And the sons of God looked upon the daughters of men. . . Perhaps I am indeed born of some other race that your kind would call demonic. Those 'sons of God,' whom many sages gloss as fallen angels, lived a very long span, as I do."

Isobel sensed a meditative sadness in him and felt an answering surge of pity in her own breast. He was aware of it, of course, as he knew every impulse that passed through her mind. His silver-gray eyes imprisoned hers. "If I have caused you pain," he said slowly, "I ask your pardon." His voice was no less cool than usual, but his sincerity was evident in his thoughts.

"You have it," said Isobel. She sensed how much it cost him to humble himself even this far.

He returned the Bible to its case and stood up. "I would have you be happy, if it is within my power. Is there anything you would ask of me — except your freedom?"

Except the one thing that could bring happiness, Isobel thought bitterly. She reflected for a moment before answering, "I would like to see you fly."

He smiled almost in relief, as he expected some wish harder to fulfill. "That's easily done. Come outside."

In the courtyard he stripped to the waist, and a mist seemed to gather around him. When it cleared, the huge wings unfurled. As Isobel watched, he bounded onto the top of the wall, seemingly without effort, as lightly as a cat. He turned and looked down at her, his only clearly visible feature the eyes that glowed red in the moonlight . He spread his wings to their full span and lifted his arms as if testing the wind. Then he launched himself skyward.

She watched him soar into the distance until, to her night-blind eyes, he was barely visible. Turning back toward the keep, he whirled in large, slow circles, gradually spiraling lower. Once he was close enough for her to see clearly, he flew several times around the towers of the castle. As he banked at dizzying angles, she held her breath, half afraid he might crash into the stone walls. At last he glided down to her side.

His hair was swept back by the wind, and the wings still vibrated with the exertion of flight. A smile played on his lips. Isobel felt his exhilaration echoed in the quickening of her own heart. She tentatively put her arms around him to touch the delicate yet unimaginably strong membrane. She felt tension in his chest as he held himself back from embracing her.

"Isobel," he whispered, as if savoring the very taste of her name. "I have hungered for you, these past few nights. I've striven to be content with the touch of your thoughts, for I do not wish to cause you further suffering. That other night, I was angry at myself, not you. I would rather not possess you without your consent."

She answered without giving herself time for reflection, "You have it."

Again she felt that her blood flowed to meet his kiss of its own accord. She clung to him, helpless beneath the convulsive waves of passion that washed over her. She hardly knew when at last he carried her to her bed and left her there.

Waking on the morrow, Isobel nerved herself to face the truth. She was plunged into wantonness with a demon, whatever he called himself. If, as the village curate preached, this passionate abandonment were sinful with a neighbor's son, how much worse, with a creature not even human? She did not deceive herself that her intact maidenhead made her pure. Her soul had been violated; her heart had gone over to the enemy's side. In only one way could she purge her guilt and save herself before she became fatally entangled.

She must find a way to destroy the Demon.

A haunter of the night, he slept by day. In all her wanderings she had not yet stumbled upon his resting place. Now, however, she had an advantage he himself had given her. Using the mind-link he

had imposed, she could track him down. True, she had never felt his unseen presence by day. She was sure, though, that if she concentrated, she could touch his sleeping mind, however faint its emanations might be compared to the sharp probe of his waking thoughts.

How she could attack him, she had no clear idea. The first step was to find him. She ate a bountiful midday meal, robed herself in a new gown, and slowly braided her hair, uncertain why she was postponing the search. At last she began wandering the corridors. She set her steps free of conscious control, as on her first day in the keep. With eyes half-closed, like a sleepwalker, she drifted along the dusty halls.

She quested for his mind, as she had never done before. Her thoughts reached out, like vines coiling up the trunk of a tree, twisting through the labyrinth of rooms. At first she felt nothing but the rustle of insects' legs and the pittering heartbeats of rats and mice. Little by little, though, she sensed something larger and slower. The atmosphere within the dank stone walls seemed to expand and contract as if in rhythm with some immense breathing. And a ponderous sound reverberated, not in her ears, but inside her head. It fell at painfully stretched out intervals, a monstrous, laboring heartbeat.

Outwardly blind, inwardly quivering in response, she turned toward the source of the rhythm. At its center she felt the cold, brittle point she knew as Reynard's consciousness. She felt herself floating toward that point, as if swept along the ever-tightening spiral of a slow but inexorable whirlpool.

When her feet again felt stone beneath them, and her eyes cleared, she was standing at the foot of a narrow staircase, before a heavy oaken door. She grasped the latch. It was unlocked.

Was Reynard so confident that none of his prisoners would dare explore these depths? Or that having found his lair, they would not raise a hand against him?

He would soon discover that Isobel was different. She lifted the latch and stepped inside.

The chamber was smaller than her own, windowless (of course), and cool with the chill of underground. Aside from a large chest and a writing desk with a lamp whose flame burned low and blue, the only furniture was the bed, canopied and curtained in purple velvet.

Isobel took a deep breath and walked over to the bed. She pulled aside the heavy drapery. Reynard lay on his back, apparently naked, shrouded to mid-chest with a coverlet embroidered in crimson and gold. His eyes were closed. his arms motionless at his sides. No rise and fall of breathing disturbed the cold, white hardness of his chest. An ignorant observer would think him dead.

Isobel laid a timid hand on his breast. He did not stir. She felt no heartbeat, though she still heard the excruciatingly slow pounding in her mind. She snatched her hand back as if from the scales of a reptile. How could she strike at him? Glancing around the room, she saw, lying across the lid of his chest, his cloak and a jeweled belt. On the belt was a scabbard, and in the scabbard a dagger. Giving herself no time for thought, she unsheathed the weapon and raised it above Reynard's chest.

If he did not wake at a touch, he would not wake from this death-sleep when a stab transformed it to true death — if she struck well the first time. At home she had slaughtered fowl and swine; she could find a man's heart, even if its throb could not be felt. Her arm had the necessary strength. She could plunge the blade between his ribs and breastbone. She could — she must. Only this knife could cut her way to freedom.

She raised her arm higher. Spasms shook it as she clutched the hilt with aching tightness, her nails gouging her palm. Unwillingly her gaze swept over the sleeping Demon. She surveyed the profusion of lustrous hair, the closed eyes, their glow veiled, the lips, cold and firm as if chiseled from stone, yet burning when they had kissed her, the arms whose relentless force had become so familiar.

She did not realize she was lowering the dagger until she noticed that the weapon was already dangling loosely in her fingers at her side. With her left hand she stroked his face, neck, and chest, marveling at the firm smoothness of his flesh. I will do the deed presently, she thought. There is ample time until sunset. I shall kill him in a few moments, after I have looked and touched my fill. It is too great a pleasure to hurry, seeing him lie here at my mercy.

She fell to her knees beside the bed, to savor that joy in comfort. Unnoticed, the knife slid from her fingertips. Her lips brushed the curve of his shoulder.

I cannot do it, she realized. I cannot strike; I am bewitched.

She laid her head on his shoulder and sank into a waking dream.

After minutes or hours, the trance became a light doze. She was jerked awake by a stirring in the flesh beneath her cheek. She sat erect with a start. His chest expanded with slow breaths. Isobel snatched up the dagger.

Reynard opened his eyes. Their glow in the faint lamplight transfixed her. The weapon fell from her hand.

Raising himself on one elbow, he captured her numb wrist. Why did she feel no anger emanating from him? "So," he said. "You have taken up the trade of an assassin. My poor child, it would take far more than this blade to end my life. It would have caused me only a few days of pain."

Isobel discovered tears welling up from her eyes. "I do not want to give you pain."

He pulled her up to sit beside him. Phantom needle-pricks stabbed her legs, tucked beneath her for hours. "How cold you are," he murmured. "This is no place for you." Putting his arms around her, he drew her down on top of him and wrapped her in a fold of the coverlet. When he kissed her, the heat of his mouth drove away all awareness of the chill stone vault where they lay.

* * *

As she worked in the garden (veiled, for facing the sun too long made her ache now), Isobel sang to herself for the first time since Alison had been chosen for the tribute. When the summer glare drove her inside, she drowsed in the library, picking up and discarding innumerable books, staring bemused at the walls between readings.

She ate little that day. (Indeed, she had trouble remembering the last time she'd felt keen hunger.) Instead of cooking, she scoured pots and scrubbed the flagstones of the kitchen floor. When that occupation failed her, she dusted the library and her bedchamber. Still she fretted at the length of the summer day.

At last twilight fell. Robed in scarlet, her black hair unbound, she strolled in the courtyard, waiting. When he did not come by full dark, she began to wonder whether she had somehow displeased him. Perhaps, on reflection, he found it distasteful to be near his would-be murderess. She mentally reached out, calling him to join her. At once she felt his silent reply, a joyful, caressing touch.

Within a few minutes he emerged from the keep. She stood waiting until he was an arm's length away. Hesitantly she reached for him. He closed the distance between them and embraced her.

"Then you are not offended with me?" she whispered.

"Offended? Oh, beloved!" She met his famished kiss with a hunger of her own. Though she was soon gasping for breath, she was sorry when he released her and stepped back.

"What is it, Reynard?" she asked, searching his face, probing the thoughts he strove to conceal. "Don't you want to hold me?"

"If only you know how much!"

"But that's what I want, too," she said. She flung herself upon him, her arms around his neck. He met her eyes incredulously as she gazed up at him in invitation. Again his lips tasted hers, then moved slowly down to her throat. She wept for joy as he drank from her.

Afterward they walked together for some time in silence. Isobel sensed the somberness of his mood, though not comprehending it. After awhile he turned her to face him. "My dear, you must go home."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Go? Reynard, why?"

"You were in no great danger while you shrank from my touch, and in mere kindness I had to hold myself aloof from you as much as possible. But now you desire me in return. I would be unable to resist you."

"I don't understand. If there's love between us —" Or was it love? Was it only satanic enchantment? At this instant she did not care.

He spoke more harshly. "Isobel, I do not wish to be your death."

"No — you didn't kill any of the others.

"None of them enchanted me as you do."

"And I thought myself the bewitched one," she said.

"Tonight I am taking you back to your home," he said.

Isobel wondered why she was so melancholy. Surely she wanted to end the dream and wake to real life again? To be able to walk freely in daylight again and converse with her father, Alison, her friends? The thought woke the fear almost forgotten. "My village — if I'm back, they will have to offer someone else as tribute. They'll live in terror again."

"No!" said Reynard vehemently. "After you, I'll have no other woman living here. You have my word, your people will remain under my protection, but there will be no more demand for tribute."

"But what of you?"

He smiled. wryly. "The forest is full of game — and the occasional outlaw who might otherwise trouble your town's peace."

"Must I leave now?" she whispered.

"Alas, I have not the strength for that. You'll stay this night." They walked together for a while longer, then they retired to her bedchamber, where she lay in his arms until nearly daybreak.

Just before sunrise he glided with her across the paling sky, barely skimming the treetops. He set her down on the road near the village. She watched him until he vanished against the violet-pink horizon.

Her legs almost collapsed beneath her when she tried to walk. Half-paralyzed with chill, she staggered into the town square. She was sobbing from weariness when, the sun just rising, she stumbled to her father's door.

Her fists hammered the once-familiar weathered wood until her father opened to her. At the first sight of Isobel, he shrank back and crossed himself. She fell to her knees. "Father?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Sweet Jesu! Are you alive?"

"Of course I'm alive." She struggled to stand. "Won't you let me in?"

By now doors were opening along the cobbled street, faces timidly peeking out. The miller took Isobel's hand and hastily pulled her inside. "My poor lass, we thought you long dead. How did you escape from the Demon?"

"I didn't. He sent me away."

Her father turned, if possible, even paler. "He was displeased with you? Then he'll seek a new victim — or some even worse revenge."

"No, no, he has sworn to protect us and ask nothing more in return. He was — was kind to me."

Her father said nothing to that, but only gazed at her skeptically as he led her into the kitchen. He settled her in a chair by the hearth and built up the banked fire. "My child, you must be fainting from hunger." He brought out a loaf of bread and a flagon of spiced wine. Isobel discovered that she was hungry and gobbled the bread in hearty chunks. The flavor was strange, though, with the taste of Reynard's blood lingering on her lips. She drank deeply of the wine in an attempt to wash it away.

"So the Demon does not devour his victims?" said the miller. "Then what did he want with you?"

Isobel avoided the affectionate but curious eyes. "Perhaps he was lonely."

"A devil from hell?" her father snorted. "Child, did he — violate you?"

Isobel heard censure as well as alarm in that question. "Certainly not, " she flared up. "Call the midwife to examine me, if you doubt." Too late, she realized she should have invented some lying tale of a bold escape. Suspicion of complicity with the Demon might brand her as evil herself. And she was no longer certain whether that censure would be mistaken. Already her memories of Reynard were becoming distorted like images in wind-ruffled water, like the nightmare she had called him.

Her father quickly assured her that he never thought of doubting her word; he patted her hand and mumbled disjointed phrases of comfort. She soon discovered, though, that her misgivings were well-founded. When, a few hours later, clad in one of her homespun dresses, she walked to the smith's house to visit Robert and Alison, her sister, too, crossed herself in fear at the first sight of Isobel. Alison, at

least, recovered instantly and embraced Isobel with more honest joy than her father had shown. But Robert's handclasp was constrained. The other members of the household wouldn't come within several feet of Isobel.

In the ensuing days this pattern recurred everywhere she went. At home the maids and apprentices scurried out of her way. Neighbors she met in the street hurried past with no more than curt greetings. She even heard Robert's mother whispering that Isobel should not be allowed near Alison, lest the unborn infant be afflicted with some evil. So Isobel stayed within her own walls as much as possible. After the first day, the miller grew to accept her return as a blessing. He rejoiced when she restored order to the disarray of his accounts and took up her familiar tasks in kitchen and garden.

She found some comfort in these workaday duties, though at first she tired quickly and had little appetite for the heavy meals that might have restored her strength. And she could not weed or prune for long, because the sun made her head ache. This complaint she soon learned to hide from her father, for he read it as a sign that she was bewitched. Though by the beginning of her second week home her weariness had somewhat abated, it never completely disappeared, for sleep eluded her.

Night after night she lay awake in her attic bed. She stared out the gable window at the waning moon, so accustomed to the night world she could hardly close her eyes. Long after midnight, when exhaustion overcame her, she would sleep for a few hours. In her father's house there was no chance of lying abed half the day, as she'd become used to. Any such foible would make him think her ill, and she could not have borne the attention that would result.

* * *

In the second week, moreover, she began to feel Reynard's presence. At first it was only a fleeting touch, as of moth-wings brushing the corners of her mind. Night by night, as she lay awake, the sensation grew stronger. She did not attempt either to reach for him or shut him out, but little by little his consciousness became intertwined with hers. She heard no words, nor did she feel anything like an appeal or a summons. Yet he was with her every waking moment between dusk and dawn. Only by day could she tell herself that this nocturnal presence was a dream, that real life consisted of the house, the garden, and Alison's visits. By day she viewed her nighttime self with dim reproach. Why was she not content? Why did she permit an invasion that resembled inviting a venomous spider to spin a web in her brain?

One night, lying naked on her moon-drenched bed, she sensed something more than mere presence. He was suffering. Her thoughts reached out to him. "Reynard — what troubles you?"

The silken dark of her chamber became the smoothness of his hands caressing her. His silent voice spoke as clearly as to her outward hearing. "I did not mean for you to be disturbed by my unease. I could no longer resist the comfort of touching your thoughts — I ask your pardon."

"Can you see me and the place where I am?"

"Yes, my every waking moment — though your loveliness tortures me, when you are so far away."

Isobel had never tried to see through his eyes. Now, closing off her physical sight, she tried and was surprised at how easy it was. She saw walls of the narrow, dimly-lit cell where he slept. Why was he lying here still, long after nightfall?

"Where else should I go?" he answered her half-formed question. "No one waits for me now."

"I have not been as happy as I expected," she told him. "Folk think me bewitched, and they shun me."

"That is nothing strange," he replied. "It will pass in time."

"The sun hurts my head, and the tasks I used to love seem tiresome."

"Dear Isobel, soon enough you will learn to love your old life again. You will forget me, save as a dream."

"Never! Oh, my Lord Reynard, won't you tell me why you are suffering?"

"I hoped you would not notice that. Isn't it plain, my dear? It's my need for you that torments me."

"Then I'll come back." She was astonished at the way her heart leaped with delight at the thought of being near him again. Now she felt that her daylight misgivings were the dream.

"No!" His anguish ripped at her soul. "I've told you, I will not be your death. My — distress — will soon fade. You must stay away."

"But I can't bear to feel you suffering."

"I can do nothing about the pain, except endure it. But I can stop you from sharing it." Like a window slamming shut, a barrier fell between them. Where he had seemed so near, she felt nothing. He had cut her off.

She cried silently into her pillow for hours before she slept. She drifted through the next day in a trance that even her father, determined as he was to forget she had ever been away, could not fail to notice. When he spoke to her, he almost had to shout, to force the words through the invisible cloud that enshrouded her.

Late that afternoon, he summoned her to the front door. Weary, wrung-out, Robert stood there, Father Cedric and his sister Janet hovering behind the young man.

"Child, Robert has sad news," the miller said, gnawing on his lower lip. He motioned for the visitors to come inside, and they did so, Robert with ill-concealed nervousness, the other two with an ostentatious show of reluctance. All ignored their host's invitation to sit.

Robert looked directly at Isobel. "Alison went into untimely labor today. An hour ago she was delivered of a dead babe."

Isobel gulped and pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. "I grieve for both of you, brother-in-law. I'll go back with you at once."

Not entirely to her surprise, Robert shook his head. "Alison needs rest. I can't let — you shouldn't visit her now." To his credit, he looked shamefaced about this rejection.

Father Cedric put in, "I've just given baptism and the last rites to the poor little thing. There is evidence that the death was not entirely in the course of nature."

Isobel understood, even before thin, sharp-nosed Janet spoke. "Those who consort with demons carry the curse of Hell."

Isobel felt a flush of indignation heat her face. "That's mad!"

"Matthew Miller, you must bring your daughter forward to answer this charge," said the curate, ignoring Isobel. "Have her in church tomorrow at noon. I and the council will be there, along with this unfortunate young man."

And everybody else in town, Isobel thought bitterly. Her father looked sickly pale. "We will be there."

Coward! But Isobel knew there was no evading the challenge. If she didn't appear for questioning, she'd be fetched by force.

Lying awake that night, she reached a decision. Her family and neighbors viewed her as an ill-omened revenant. Except for her father, who was driven more by desire for a placid existence than by affection, they neither wanted nor needed her. Reynard did. She now recognized his need, and her response to it, as love.

She waited with small patience until the household fell asleep. Since she rarely ventured of her own will beyond the garden gate, her father had no suspicion of nocturnal wandering, much less flight. It was an easy matter for Isobel to slink downstairs to the stable and once more saddle her favorite mare. Quietly plodding, the old beast bore her through the town square and along the road to the keep.

When the road narrowed to an overgrown path and meandered away to nothing, Isobel dismounted and pointed the horse back to town. A slap on the rump started the mare ambling homeward. Isobel walked with brisk but unhurried strides until she came to the castle gate. Only then did she probe for Reynard's mind. As she had half expected, she sensed no response. Even weakened by hunger, he was strong enough to shut her out if he chose.

Testing the postern gate, she found it unlocked. Her heart lifted — however vehemently he ordered her to stay away, at some level he'd been expecting disobedience. She entered the keep, calling his name

aloud, groping slowly along the corridor until her eyes grew accustomed to the near-total darkness. She found one torch burning steadily and took it with her down the narrow, semicircular stairs. Still he had not answered her call. The torchlight shimmered on something that veiled the stones. Taking a few more steps down, she was confronted by a spider web spun across her path. Grimacing, she poked it with one fingertip. The strands melted to mist and drifted away. Clammy air oozed along her bare arms. The temperature seemed to have dropped in the past minute or two, for her breath made visible puffs.

Something rustled on the stairs below. Out of the gloom crawled the spinner of the web. A spider as big as her head raised its hairy palps as it scuttled toward her. It almost brushed her feet before she could make her limbs respond. She swept the torch down as if swinging an ax. The spider burst into flame and tumbled down the steps in a dwindling fireball. She leaned on the damp wall, gasping, until she could force herself to move again. A stink of decay began to gather like invisible fog. A moment later she saw the source, heaped up corpses of rats on the stones. The spider's prey? She didn't recall seeing any rats down here that first time. With one toe she edged the rigid bodies, their hair matted with dried blood, out of her way. A dozen steps further, the stairs were clear again. She heard a louder rattle.

Looking down, she glimpsed a centipede as long as her forearm, its pincers snapping. Her stomach cramping with disgust, she didn't think of the torch this time. Bracing herself for a sting, she kicked the creature. Both claws fastened on her ankle. Pain lanced through her leg up to the groin. She fell to her knees, barely avoiding a tumble down the steps. Nausea blinded her for a few seconds. When she opened her eyes, the centipede was gone. She resumed her descent, remotely wondering why her pain had disappeared, too.

The staircase twisted like a broken-backed lizard. She found herself climbing instead. She reversed her path and continued down. Another dizzying jerk, and she was ascending again. Illusion. Isobel growled in her throat, to keep from yielding to tears, and went on climbing. The whole structure heaved a sigh and righted itself. She was going down once more.

Suddenly rock crumbled under her foremost foot. She cringed back and gripped the rough stone of the wall. A scream gathered in her head as she scrabbled at the slippery surface. The torch showed the stairway fallen into rubble, nothing but an open pit as far as the light shone. Illusion again? Did she dare trust her life to that guess?

So Reynard was determined to drive her away. "It won't work!" Isobel shouted into the echoes. "I'm coming to you, and you can't stop me!" She laid down the torch, allowing it to sputter out, and leaped into the dark. Cold, wet air enveloped her. Her stomach lurched. She landed with a bone-crushing thud, and her head exploded.

Some time, or no time, later, the blackness melted into normal sight. A candle burned low in a sconce on the wall. She found she was crouched at the bottom of the stairs. The air expanded and contracted with Reynard's life-pulse. Now, outside his chamber door, she made contact with his mind. What she sensed was the muted death-sleep, though the sun had already set.

She pushed open the heavy, creaking door and approached the curtained bed. Just as before, she opened the drapes and viewed Reynard's motionless form. He appeared even more death-like than before. Why was he sleeping after dark? Had he lied about the severity of his illness?

Isobel probed his quiescent thoughts, trying to rouse some response. Only a faint, wordless stirring answered her. She looked around the room and noticed his dagger lying with his cloak, as before. Holding the dagger in her right hand, she sat on the edge of the bed and set the blade against her left forearm. It was a moment before she could gather the courage to make the cut. She sliced a clean incision along her inner arm and was surprised at how little pain the razor-sharp edge inflicted.

She pressed the wound to his lips, silently calling him with all force of her love. His eyes opened, and he began, apparently without volition, to suck the slowly upwelling drops of blood. After a few seconds he came to full consciousness. "Isobel — I thought you were a dream." He turned his head and held her arm away from him, his grip still too strong for her to break.

"Reynard, what's the meaning of this?"

His breathing came harsh and ragged. "I told you to stay away."

"1 could not — you are all I want."

"Fool — I might kill you."

"No!" she said, fighting tears. "I'm not afraid of you; why are you afraid of yourself? You can't know how you'll behave, because no one has ever come to you willingly before."

"That's true." He let out his pent-up breath in a deep sigh. "My dear, if you come back now, I'll never have the strength to send you away again.

"I'll never want to leave," she said proudly. "I know now that all I want is to dwell in the night world with you, forever."

She felt a tremor in his hands as he brought the open wound to his lips and kissed away the blood. He raised his arms to embrace her, she joyfully presented her throat to his kiss, and they became one in flesh and mind.

~ The End ~

# Remember Me?

by

*Denysé M. Bridger*

*I've been waitin' in your dark room*
*With the full moon in my eyes*
*Baby you should have locked your window*
*'Cause I warned you I'd come back to say Goodnight*
*And I've waited all this time to let you know*
*It's taken me this long to let you go*

I felt his approach long before I heard it. His footfalls on the stairs, the tremor of power that surrounded him. Gods! How long had it been since I'd felt that agony of sensuality and terror, the combination of paradoxes that found their meaning in him?

His pain is so deep, so profound. He's always carried pain, but not like this. This is anguish of a scope I can hardly imagine. Why? What has happened to create this chasm of misery in his soul?

Pull yourself together, girl! I wasn't here to remember how completely he'd once captivated me, how totally he'd dominated my world... How he had become my life in the space of a heartbeat.

How many hours before the dawn kisses this room, turns it into a death-trap? He'd be careful, in spite of his mood. Survival is bred into men like him. He's proof of eternity, after all. The embodiment of darkness, and light.

Moon beams caught in his hair as he opened the door, and I was struck mute and motionless when he froze, dazzling blue eyes peered into the shadows, and his mouth curved into a smile of recognition.

"Come out," he invited. He closed the door to this small, luxurious cabin that he called home. "If I'd known you were in the area, I would have asked you to join me."

"You assume I would want any part of you now," I remarked with all the casual ice I could create for my voice.

"I never assume," he laughed with genuine coldness. "I know."

I accepted his arrogance. It was something I knew. We were now back on familiar terms.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Personal vintage, or part of the wildlife?"

"Your tastes have refined," he observed with sincere satisfaction.

*You remember me*
*How you stole my heart*
*I've come back to get*
*What you took that night*
*You can't hurt me now*
*I'm all over you*
*When I leave my heart goes with me*
*When I leave my heart goes with me this time*

The fire was beautiful, like him. I hated him. I loved him.

"Why are you here?" I asked. "It doesn't seem your style at all."

"The isolation appeals to me for the time being," he replied, and the secretiveness was as alluring as he'd meant it to be.

"You don't usually like to be alone."

"I'm not, now," he reminded me.

"Yes, you are," I retorted. "I'm passing through. This is a one night engagement. We have things to finish."

"Finish?" He laughed, delighted. "We finished our business years ago, my dear."

"You did," I smiled. "I wasn't even sure what business we'd undertaken. I know now, though. I've gotten pretty good at this, over the decades."

"You sound bitter," he drawled.

I turned away, peered at the ancient dance of the flames. The 'wine' was excellent, naturally. He wouldn't have anything else.

I felt him stand, trembled unwillingly at the ache of longing that rose inside me. I didn't want him. It became a litany. It was a joke.

I heard the moan of agonised pleasure when his hands encircled my waist, pulled me back against his body. That body I dreamed about, obsessed about, needed more desperately than life. How could he do this to me again? His mouth was near my neck, and I thought I'd fall to my knees when his tongue caressed the corner of my jaw.

*Got no switchblade in my pocket*
*Got no razor up my sleeve*
*Nothin' I'd do could compare to*
*The way you cut the heart right out of me*
*And I've got to see your face before I go*
*There's something I've just got to let you know*

I climbed across his hips and looked down at him. There wasn't an inch of me that didn't quiver with awareness, and pulse with completion. He kissed each of my palms, and tugged me down so I could surrender to his passion another time.

"No."

"We've done that once already tonight," he laughed, the sound sensual, provocative.

"Then we'll do it again."

"We will," he said and the arms around me lost their gentleness, he trapped me against him. I couldn't evade the swiftness of his fangs finding the throb in my neck. His growl evoked a spasm of raw lust, I screamed, frustration and denial. Both emotions were lost to his merciless feeding.

*You remember me*
*How you stole my life*
*I've come back to get*
*What you took that night*
*You can't hurt me now*
*I'm all over you*
*When I leave my heart goes with me*
*When I leave my heart goes with me this time*

"I hate you."

"I would never have guessed."

"Really?" I smiled, and the strength he'd taken came back. "I hated you then, LaCroix. When you found me, seduced me, and left me to find my way the best way I could. You tossed me away to find them, the two you've lost. Nicholas. How many times did I wonder just who it was that held so much power over you, the most powerful man I'd ever met? And you bloody bastard, you killed him, too."

He reached for me, and I struck.

The stake, sharpened ash, found it's mark. It buried it in his chest, impaled his heart, if he still had one. I cried, I knew he had a heart, and I wanted to offer him everything, life and the love I had never been able to give anyone after him.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "LaCroix..."

I don't even know what I wanted to say, it became a sob.

Terror...

Regret...

Loss...

"It's almost morning, the sun is rising."

Blue eyes remained cold, impassive. His acceptance was heartbreaking.

"I don't hate you," I pleaded for a flicker of warmth. He smiled, but there was only indifference in the exquisitely perfect face.

"If you'd only remembered me..."

"I remember all my children," he whispered, voice roughened with pain, and anger. "I remembered you. I trusted you with my greatest weakness, didn't I?"

"Nicholas," I cried.

"Has your betrayal strengthened you?"

The sun flooded into the room, and slowly made its way to the bed. I watched it, perversely drawn to the silent smoulder of his skin, the puffs of smoke that grew steadily darker. I knew I was dying with him, that I needed to leave his side.

And I knew then that I needed more to stay.

To die with him...

To live within him...

As I had once lived for him...

*I've fallen from the mountain*
*Been swept up by the storm*
*Stumbled through the desert*
*Just to make it to your door*
*So I think it's only fair you should know*
*Now I'm strong enough to really let you go*

YOU REMEMBER ME:
written by David Cassidy, Sur Shifrin, Michael Dan Ehmig ©1989

# Fait Accompli

by
*Denysé M. Bridger*

**he arrives**

**they dance attendance on a presence**
**that rivals royalty**
**his eyes are everywhere**
**assessing the madness he incites**
**by merely being**
**his amusement is cool**
**disdain cloaked in charm**
**contempt veiled and**
**concealed behind fathomless**
**ocean blue eyes**

**he invites**

**beckons with false warmth**
**always in search of the one spirit**
**that will challenge him**
**arouse the madness he craves**
**to experience**
**his hunger is real**
**buried beneath urbane grace**
**tamed by and**
**hidden within ancient**
**sapphire pools of wisdom**

**he finds her**
**they dance attendance on their fate**
**king and queen of the night**
**he sees none but her**
**she glories in his madness**
**by merely being**
**at his side**
**consort to a master she adores**
**his hunger**
**consumes them as they share**
**their danse macabre**

**fire and ice**

**flame red hair haloes the vixen**
**turns her seductress eyes**
**the colour of emerald**
**she claims her lover**
**flaunts her prize**
**before their envious looks**
**delights in her power**
**his power**
**the gift he allows**
**return for enchantment**

**silver radiance**

**pale beauty defines the fallen angel**
**turns indigo eyes**
**to golden fire**
**he chose well this time**
**a maiden worthy of his honour**
**he feels it in their angry stares**
**revels in his control**
**her control**
**the gift she allows**
**return for eternity**

**they merge**

**twin souls born for each other**
**understanding**
**spirits entwined as**
**tightly as their coiled lovers bodies**
**joined in a union**
**no god could sanctify**
**unholy alliance made pure**
**their hunger sears all**
**destiny met**
**fait accompli**

# Forever Nick

*by*

***B.N. Fish***

*(**Author's note:** This story is based on an idea of Mary Ann McKinnon's. She got this idea a couple of years ago. I got tired of waiting for her to do something with it.)*

**"Who's there?" Nick Knight called into the shadows.** *And how did you get past the alarm to my apartment?*

"You got some company, partner?" asked Schanke standing at Nick's side.

The blond vampire could barely make out the huddled shape by the elevator doors that led to his loft. He held out an arm to bar his partner's surge forward.

"Watch it, Schankes," Knight warned.

"Gotcha," the man said moving off to the side, his weapon ready.

Carefully Nick approached the too-still figure.

"Who are you?" he asked. "How did you get in?"

There had been no sign of forced entry at the front door, or any place else that he could see. Cautiously Knight bent down to touch a leather-clad shoulder.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked.

The figure shuddered but said nothing.

*Is he hurt?* "Are you all right?"

"Be careful, Nick," Schanke said softly.

Knight nodded and almost touched the figure again. But suddenly the stranger's head jerked up, his eyes blazing. Literally.

*Vampire,* Nick ascertained.

In alarm, Schanke moved. But the stranger had fallen back, his eyes closed.

"What's with the weird eyeballs?" Nick's partner asked, his gun still drawn.

"It must be the light," Knight said, making up the excuse without thinking.

"*What* light?" Schanke demanded. "There's not enough light in here to swing a cat."

Nick stored the comment away to think about later.

*Well, maybe not.* "Can you get up?" he asked the stranger.

"Leave me alone," the man said weakly.

*Not that a weak vampire can't still do a lot of damage.*

"Well, what do you think, partner?" Schanke asked. "Do we call in backup, or an ambulance?"

Nick shook his head, unsure as to what to do. Helping a wounded vampire's a very risky business. Especially to the helper, even if he's a vampire, too.

"No ambulance," said the stranger, getting to his feet.

Dark hair flew around pale face. A tall forehead and narrow chin gave no indication of his mortal status, the eyes still being closed. Yet Knight noticed that when the other used the wall to steady himself, he left small dents in the chrome framing of the elevator.

*Definitely vampire.*

"I'll be all right," the stranger said, as he stood clear.

"Just what happened to you, buddy?" Schanke asked.

"I got jumped," the man said. "They must have dumped me here."

"Did you see them?" Nick asked.

"No," the other said checking his pockets. "No wallet. Simple robbery and assault, it looks like."

*With a vampire? Hardly simple,* Knight thought.

"I can't identify anyone," the stranger went on, "and the odds of you finding my ID and/or money is next to nil. So. About all that's left is bemoaning my bad luck and moving on."

"You a cop or somethin'?" Schanke asked.

"...No."

*Why the hesitation?* "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?" Nick asked.

No hesitation this time, "I'll be fine. No broken skin. No broken bones. What more can you ask?"

"What about concussion?"

"Well, I won't deny the headache," the stranger conceded. "I'll just make sure somebody wakes me up, or something."

"We should make a report," Schanke said.

"No," the other shook his head. "Save on the paperwork."

*You sound like a cop.* "You're sure?" Knight asked.

"Yeah."

Nick continued to study the newcomer, "...Why don't you head on home, Schanke? He can call from my place."

"Call who?" the stranger asked.

"Home? A cab?" Knight suggested.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." The other shook his head, "I guess I'm more shook up than I thought."

"Ah, Nick," Schanke motioned him aside, supposedly out of the stranger's earshot. "You sure this is a good idea?"

*Not really,* Knight admitted to himself. "What's the matter, Schankes? Don't you trust him?"

"I don't know. He doesn't look like trouble. But he does seem a little out of it. There might be more to him than we can see."

*I can guarantee that.* "I'll be careful."

"You do that," Schanke said. "Good partners are hard to come by."

"Good night then."

"Night." The mortal called out to the stranger, "What's your name, anyway?"

"...Andy. Andy Braumberg."

*Hesitation again.*

"Well," Schanke said, "you take care of yourself, Andy. You've had more than your fair share of bad luck for the night."

"I agree. Daylight's coming so I can't have too much more tonight at least," Andy shrugged.

"I hope not, for your sake. Night all," Nick's partner said to both men, with a special warning look to Nick.

Knight nodded with a wave. Schanke left. The remaining police detective turned back to his guest.

"Are you *sure* you're all right?" Nick asked.

"I have felt better. But I'm getting there. You know, your partner's right. Taking a stranger into your home isn't the safest thing to do."

"I intend to keep a close eye on you." *And since you don't know that I'm a vampire, I should have a certain edge.*

"To see if I attack you, or to see if I collapse?" Andy asked, as he leaned against the wall.

*You're not in good shape either way.* "Both. Let's go on up," Knight said, directing the other into the elevator. "As you said, the sun she is a'comin'."

"Did I say that?"

"Words to that effect."

The elevator rose to Nick's floor. Braumberg's knees buckled slightly with the movement.

"For a second there I thought maybe I was feeling better," the stranger said, closing his eyes briefly.

"I have a friend who's a doctor," Knight said, as they stepped into his living quarters. "She could come over to look at you."

"No thanks," the other said. "I think I need to sleep more than anything."

"Don't forget the possible concussion."

"Oh, yeah. This being mortal isn't all it's cracked up to be, you know?"

"So I've heard." *Mortal? What are you talking about?*

"Point me toward your phone and I'll try to get out of your life."

"Over there," Nick indicated, still watching the other closely.

The stranger glanced around the living area on his way to the phone. Just before Andy picked up the hand set, his attention was distracted by the windows that lined one wall of Knight's apartment. Following the other's gaze, Nick saw the early morning sun filtering through the frosted glass. The other seemed fascinated by the weak light, as he moved toward it and then into the rays.

Predictably, the exposed skin of Braumberg's hands and face began to steam and burn. Andy gasped with pain, but he made no effort to get out of the charring light. Exasperated, Nick yanked him clear. After patting the smoldering figure down, Knight went to his refrigerator and retrieved a bottle. Pulling the cork, he held it out to his guest.

"Drink this," he ordered.

Andy stared at the amber glass a few moments. He sniffed at it. Then he looked at Nick, and shook his head.

"No."

Knight frowned, as he put the bottle on the table. He went to close the electronic curtains. Then he turned to face his guest.

Softly, he asked, "Who are you, Andy Braumberg? *What* are you?"

"...You've got some pretty good questions there," the other sighed. "Got any answers?"

Nick lifted the bottle, "I have one."

Andy turned away, "I don't happen to like your answer. How about we try a different question?"

"It won't change anything."

"I'm a firm believer in procrastination. ...I think," the stranger shrugged.

*He has forgotten,* Nick thought. *How does one forget being a vampire?*

"You're one, too. Aren't you?" Braumberg asked suddenly.

Startled, Knight asked carefully, "...What makes you think that?" *You shouldn't know that.*

It was the other's turn to be confused, "...Well,...ah.... Blood is hardly standard stock for most mortal refrigerators."

"I could use it for paint thinner," Nick said.

"You've got to be kidding."

*Let's not get too carried away with this.* The detective shrugged, "Some people believed it."

"Maybe somebody who wanted to believe it?"

Nick smiled, "Maybe," thinking of Schanke. "...Is Andy Braumberg your real name?"

"I don't think so. But I don't know. It's what came to mind."

"Maybe you're just good at coming up with new names," Knight offered.

"Maybe."

"Where are you from?"

The other shook his head, "...I can do even better than that. Where *am* I?"

"Toronto."

"As in Ontario?" Andy asked wide-eyed.

"You didn't expect to be in Canada?"

"No. I don't know where I expected to be. But not there. Here," he corrected. "Wherever."

"Enough," Nick said firmly. "Drink this," putting the bottle into the other's hand. "Then to bed."

The stranger stared at it, frowning, "I can find someplace else to sleep."

Knight pointed to the now closed windows, "Not without difficulty. Drink."

Andy sighed. Then he drank, and drank, until he emptied the contents.

"Where?" he asked, as he held out the bottle.

Nick indicated a box near the refrigerator.

"Thank you," the other said, disposing of the glass.

The newcomer then went to the couch and prepared to remove his shirt.

*And not a word about the fact it's animal blood versus human,* Nick mused. *He wasn't surprised by it at all. He could have forgotten that, too, I suppose. But blood is very elemental.*

Andy sat on his make-shift bed and said, "Tomorrow I'll find a place of my own."

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea," Nick said, the thought only now coming together in his mind.

"Why not?"

"Because of the way you were found."

"You mean inside the building? How about careful muggers? They didn't want me lying around, drawing attention?" the other offered.

"Perhaps. But it does seem a bit coincidental that you were placed inside a locked anteroom where you were certain to be found by *me*."

Andy considered, "...How about conscientious, careful muggers?"

"Careful, conscientious muggers who caught a vampire off guard and incapacitated him?"

"Vampire muggers, then."

Knight waited.

"Not very likely, huh?" the other asked. "Deliberate then. But who? Why?"

"If we find the one...," Nick began.

"...We'll find the other," Braumberg finished.

"Get some sleep. We'll tackle this tonight."

The stranger lay back on the couch and said, "Hopefully, by then I'll have some more pieces to add to the puzzle. ...Have you ever heard of a vampire with amnesia?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Good," Andy said with some weak attempt at satisfaction. "At least I haven't forgotten everything."

"Sleep."

"I'm willing," the other said closing his eyes. "*Bon soir.*"

*French?* Nick shook his head, *Not now.* He went to bed himself.

* * *

When Knight rose the next evening, he found his guest already up. That is, he was already up in the sense that the other was no longer lying on the couch asleep. Andy was on the floor, sitting on his heels while his arms bowed over his knees. His eyes closed, his head bent, he was perfectly motionless.

Nick approached the man silently. Suddenly the dark head tipped back and blue eyes blazed straight at his startled host.

"Do you know me?" an echoed voice from the other's mouth demanded.

Knight felt the compulsion wash around him. The need to tell the complete truth. But then Nick had no reason to do otherwise.

"No," he answered.

Immediately the sensation ceased, as Andy lowered his eyes.

"That's too bad," the guest said softly.

"I could be lying."

"Are you?" Braumberg asked without looking up again, as if he knew that it had been the truth.

*Who are you?* "No."

"It would be nice if *somebody* knew what was going on," the other sighed.

"You still can't remember anything?"

"Flashes. Bits and pieces," Andy shrugged, as he rocked to his feet. "Nothing attached to anything. Words. Faces."

"What faces?"

"Your partner, for one."

"Schanke?" Nick asked amazed.

"And no offense, but he doesn't have a face I particularly want to dream about."

"No offense taken. Especially since neither one of us is going to tell him about it," Knight smiled.

"Okay by me."

The other walked over to the kitchen, where a damp but clean t-shirt and jacket waited. Andy had evidently tried to do some cleaning up.

"I can lend you a change of clothes, if you wish," Nick offered.

"A dry shirt would be nice. Our conscientious muggers seem to have had a fondness for garbage."

"Come with me."

Nick led the way to the upper level of his apartment with his half-clad guest in tow.

"I will repay you," said Andy, "when I get my memory, or a job...whichever comes first."

"There's no hurry. We both have plenty of time," Knight smiled.

"I hope so. Somebody's gone through a bit of trouble to mess up both our lives."

*Both of us?* Nick wondered, as he opened up his closet doors. "Take your pick." *He could be right.*

Knight watched his guest look over his clothes.

"You have quite a wardrobe," Andy said.

"I've lived here a while, and I've had time to accumulate a few things. What do you like?"

The other looked at him archly, "You're asking *me*?"

"What do you prefer *now*?"

"This one?" he asked, pointing to a long-sleeve burgundy shirt.

"Go ahead."

"I hate to be borrowing your clothes."

"At this point, it's a case of borrowing my clothes, or stealing someone else's."

"The lesser of two evils, huh? Okay, then."

Andy pulled out the preferred shirt.

Nick said, "I was wondering if you would come into the station with me and let Nat take a look at you."

"'Nat'?"

"Dr. Lambert."

Braumberg nodded slowly, "That might be a good idea. ...Take a look."

He held out his arm. Knight saw a faded dot at the center crook of the other man's arm. It was like a pin prick almost.

"A needle mark?" Nick asked.

"That's what it looks like to me. And no, I don't *think* I'm a user."

"Good. Forgetful vampires are one thing. Addict vampires are something else."

"Right." The other put on the shirt, saying, "I think after I see your friend, I'll do a little cruising on my own. See if I can jar some memories loose. Or maybe find out how I got here."

"Okay," Knight agreed, heading toward the bathroom.

Andy followed.

"Let's see if we can establish what you do know," the detective said, stepping to the sink.

"Not much."

"Your name?" Nick asked.

"Nope."

"Your age?" Knight asked, looking in the mirror, as he brushed his teeth.

The other man only shook his head.

"Where you're from?"

"Nothing."

"Where were you born?"

This time Andy hesitated, "...Not here?"

Nick considered, "That eliminates one city. What about family?"

"No," came the quiet answer. "There's no one."

It was the first certain reply Knight had gotten.

"You're sure?"

"As I can be, yes."

"Do you remember anything about them? Names?"

"No," Andy shook his head again. "Nothing."

The guest took his turn at the sink.

Nick offered a packaged toothbrush, "What makes you think they're all dead?"

"I don't know. There's an emptiness there. It's not...a recent type of...pain. But they're definitely gone."

"And your master?" Nick asked.

"Him, I don't know."

"'Him'?" Knight questioned.

The other thought about it. "I don't know. I <u>think</u> so. But who he is, or what his name is, I can't say."

"Well, it's a start. You go out there," Knight pointed to the great room, "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Okay."

Andy left. Nick stared after him for a moment, then he turned to the mirror.

"Who is he?" he asked aloud.

But his reflection had no revelations. So he went on with his hurried ablutions. When he came out, Knight found the other looking over his artist's supplies. Andy looked up before the detective finished crossing the room.

"You *do* paint," Andy announced.

"I dabble."

Andy shook his head at the comment. "Do you ever sell your work?"

"No." Even to his own ears, Nick's reply seemed abrupt.

"That's too bad."

"You ready to go?" the blond asked.

"Yeah," Andy said making a grab for his jacket.

"You got it cleaned up," Knight commented, as he led the way out.

"Yeah. It did pretty well, too. It's a nice piece of leather, assuming it's mine."

"You think it might not be?"

"Who knows?"

They got outside and approached the green Cadillac.

"Very nice," the guest nodded. "Early sixties, isn't it?"

"'62 in fact."

"And lots of trunk space," Andy said, getting in.

Nick took his place behind the wheel. "That's right."

"Practical and good looks, too. What more can you ask?"

"Maybe better gas mileage?"

"They didn't worry about mileage in '62," Braumberg shrugged.

"They should have."

"True."

They took off. Nick saw his guest looking out the window, as they drove along.

"See anything familiar?" Knight asked.

"Nope. Maybe from above." Then the other seemed to think of something. "Uh...we *do* fly, don't we?"

Nick grinned, "We do."

"Good. It just now occurred to me that I might be relying too much on what I think I remember."

"Except for your slight run in with the sunlight, you seem to remember quite a bit."

"Well, at least, I'm still potty trained."

"There is that," Knight said dryly. "Don't worry. It'll come back."

"Yeah. Well. Logically," Andy said tapping his temple, "I *know* it probably will. But emotionally," moving a fist over his heart, "I sure *hope* so. After all, vampires are pretty tough. Right?" It was a real question.

"Right," Nick affirmed.

"Good," the guest said with feeling.

*Young,* Nick thought. *There's no telling how old he is. But he seems so* ***young****.*

At Police Headquarters, Nick led the way downstairs to the Morgue. Natalie was working on some paperwork.

"Nat?"

"Hi," the doctor smiled in greeting. Then she saw the other man, "So, you did bring him by." She came around her desk and held out her hand, "Natalie Lambert."

"Andy Braumberg," the guest said taking her grip briefly.

"Schanke told me about the mugging," she explained. "How do you feel?"

"Better."

Nick spoke up, "He's got amnesia, Nat. I was wondering if you could look him over?"

"You should go to a hospital," the doctor said, immediately concerned.

"No," Andy said. "I don't do...that well with hospitals."

"Nick?" she appealed.

*And how do I explain this one?* "We were mostly interested in a blood test. There looks to be a needle mark on his arm."

"Then you definitely should go to a hospital," the doctor insisted.

"No," Braumberg said firmly.

Natalie frowned, as she got her ophthascope. She looked into the other's eyes. Surprised, she picked up his wrist to take his pulse. She stared at him.

"You're a vampire."

"Yes, ma'am," Andy smiled weakly.

Natalie turned to glare at Nick, "You know, you could give a person a little warning."

Knight grinned, "And miss that look on your face? Perish the thought." *And that thought is COWARD!*

"But a blood test?" the woman questioned. "If there are drugs in your system, they dissipate quickly."

"Even some vestige of a drug might give us a lead on who did this," the detective said.

"You think it was deliberate?" Nat questioned.

"Accidents do happen," the blond man admitted, "even to vampires. But as it's been pointed out, there are a few coincidences at work here," with a glance at the other man.

Before Nat could ask, Braumberg spoke up, "I don't think the amnesia was planned. I don't see how it could be." He shrugged, "You can take that at face value, considering my memory at this point. But the more I think about it, the more I think this whole thing is aimed at you," Nick, "rather than me."

"But why?" the doctor asked.

"If we find that out," said Knight, "we're half-way there."

"But if you don't want to do the test," Andy said brightly, "I won't force it on you."

"You don't like blood tests?"

"I *hate* them," the other said with feeling.

"When did you have one last?" Knight asked with a look at Dr. Lambert.

Andy opened his mouth. Then he shut it. He shook his head.

"I'm getting tired of this."

"Yes, but it's still a little bit more than we knew before," the blond said.

"Like what?"

"That you know a doctor well enough to have it done," Natalie said.

"You're assuming I was willing," Braumberg pointed out.

The doctor shrugged.

"I'd say you probably were willing," said Knight.

"Why? Because I'm a vampire?" the other questioned. "I can personally attest to the fact that we are *not* always in control."

"That's not what I meant," Nick shook his head. "I think that if you *had* been forced, your reaction would have been more violent."

"Maybe," Andy conceded. "But with a memory like mine, how can you tell?"

"A calculated guess."

"Calculated on not much."

"Maybe," Nick shrugged. "But if you do have friends, they're probably looking for you."

"If ," Braumberg emphasized, "I have friends, and *if* they're looking for me, what makes you think they know where to look?"

Knight looked to Natalie for support. She held up her hands helplessly.

"*I* sure don't know where to look," Andy went on. "I don't even know *who* they're looking for."

Pause.

"Are you done yet?" Nick asked patiently.

The other sighed, "...Doesn't help, does it? That's too bad, 'cause I'm working on a major case of frustration, here. And I've got a feeling it's going to get worse before it gets better." To the doctor, "You'd better go ahead and do your test. And then I'll get out of here, so I can do my ranting and raving in private."

Quickly the woman did just that.

"Okay, I'll see you later," the dark-haired man said, as he started to leave.

"Andy," Nick called, "meet me at the Raven at 6:00."

"'The Raven'?"

"It's a bar, of sorts," the blond smiled.

Andy nodded, "I'll find a phone book. 'Bye all."

And he was gone.

"...You're going to set Janette on him?" Natalie asked.

"If anyone knows what's happening with our kind, she does."

"But he's not exactly at his best right now. Or rather, I assume he's not."

"That's something else," Nick admitted. "It's one way to find out what he's capable of."

"Capable of what? Being turned into sushi? I already have some idea of what *she's* capable of."

"Oh, I don't think she'll hurt him. Not as long as I keep close by."

"Hold that thought."

"I will. Take care, Nat."

* * *

"Well, hello, Nicholah," Janette said brightly.

Nick looked around the almost empty club. Dawn was not far away and most of this bar's clientele were definitely "night people".

"And what do you want?" the lady went on. "It seems that you only come here when you want something."

Knight thought about it. "I should do something about that," he admitted.

"Yes, you should," she agreed.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

"Oh, Nicholah," she protested. "Why do you insist on bring *those* people here?"

"He's one of us, Janette."

"Then he's more than welcome," she added, "to an introduction, "

"He has amnesia," Nick said abruptly.

The woman stared only briefly. Then she shook her head.

"*We* do not have amnesia," she said sternly. "Our memories are quite remarkable."

Knight muttered, "Whether we want them or not." He knew that Janette had heard. He continued, "It could be induced by drugs."

"He's an adventurous type then?" she asked with curiosity.

"Possibly. But I don't think so."

"What does Dr. Natalie say?" she asked sweetly.

Nick ignored the tone, "Nat's running some tests. But even if she finds something, it won't tell me if he's shamming it."

"And *I* can?"

"I'd like to know what you think. After all, where else would I go about things vampire?" Knight added gallantly.

"Do *you* trust him?" she asked skeptically.

"...I want to."

"That's rather foolish, Nicholah. You don't know him. And possibly he doesn't even know himself."

"I know."

"So? Where is he?" she asked, looking around.

"He's supposed to meet me here. ...If you hear anything, let me know."

"Just what am I listening for?"

"I'm not sure. But if someone did orchestrate the drugs and the dumping on my doorstep, it would take a certain amount of planning."

"And power," Janette added.

"That, too," he agreed. "There he is."

The newcomer had entered the bar and was standing off from the doorway, while he glanced over the place.

"He doesn't look imposing," Janette observed.

Nick said nothing, as he waved to his house guest. Andy nodded, as he approached them. The other especially studied the woman.

*As if that's so usual,* Nick commented to himself. Aloud, "Andy Braumberg, this is Janette."

"'Janette'?" the visitor questioned.

"Does the name surprise you?" the lady asked slowly.

*Watch out. Don't antagonize her.*

"I guess it does," Andy smiled, unaware of the danger. "For some reason I got the image of a face lined with bitterness. That's certainly not you. You're quite beautiful."

*Nice save, that.*

Janette nodded in acceptance, "...Perhaps she's someone you know."

"Maybe."

Nick decided it was time to join the conversation, "How did your survey of the city go?"

"Just fine. It's an attractive place. And not at all familiar."

"Have you remembered anything else?"

"Not really. It'll come," Braumberg shrugged. "After all, who ever heard of a vampire with no memory?"

"Perhaps you don't *want* to remember," Janette suggested.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Too bad I can't have selective memory loss."

"It's been known to happen," the lady smiled.

"But not with other vampires," the other countered. "...Has it?" he asked Nick.

"No," Nick answered. "We should get going." Then he turned to Andy, "I'll meet you by the car."

"Okay." Braumberg told Janette, "It's a pleasure to have met you."

"Yes," was all she said.

Andy left.

Knight turned to the lady, "What do you think?"

"He could be faking it."

"But *is* he?"

"I don't know. *But*," she emphasized, "we do not lose our memories."

"We certainly never have before," Nick agreed. "How old do you think he is?"

"Not very. A century. Maybe two. But no more than that."

Knight nodded in agreement, "You're not impressed with him then?"

"No," she said flatly. "Are you?"

"I'm not sure. There's something about him." He shook his head, "It's almost as if...."

"As if," Janette said thoughtfully, "he were familiar somehow."

"*Yes*," Nick said with conviction.

"I have *never* met him before, Nicholah," she said with finality.

"Nor I," he sighed. "He does seem to have some unusual abilities though."

"Like what?"

"Like knowing you were a vampire."

"So?"

"*I* didn't tell him."

"Why else would you bring him to me?" she asked reasonably.

"Okay, except when I took him to Natalie, he knew about her, too."

"Did he?" she mused, vaguely interested in spite of herself.

"I have to go," he said with a quick kiss to her cheek. "Sleep well, Janette."

"And you, *cheri*."

Knight waved on his way out. He found Andy crouching down beside the driver's door examining a small chip in the paint of his car.

"One of the hazards of a public parking lot," Nick called out.

"I know. But it's still a shame."

They got into the Cadillac.

"...Did Janette have anything to say about me?" the other asked hesitantly.

"That we're both agreed. You're less than two hundred years old."

"Well, I'm not as old as you two," the other commented. "But I don't think that helps much."

"How do you know we're older?"

"You mean that you're not?"

"I didn't say that," Nick shook his head. "I just want to know how *you* know."

Braumberg looked comically perplexed, "...You *feel* older."

"Well, that may work for me. But I wouldn't tell Janette that."

"I guess not. Not very chivalrous, is it? How old *are* you?"

"I'm eight hundred. Janette is...more," Knight finished with a smile.

"Then I *am* right."

"Only if you're younger. We don't know that for certain yet."

Andy sighed.

They rode back to Nick's apartment in silence. Once upstairs, the other went straight to the sofa and turned it down. He sat down with a thud. Knight went to his answering machine, hoping to find a message from Natalie. There was one.

"Greetings, oh great Tooth Fairy," came her cheery voice over the speaker.

"'Tooth Fairy'?" Andy questioned.

Nick decided not to comment, as he listened.

"The results are in from that test. They're inconclusive. There is a trace of some kind of drug. But I couldn't tell what. I also couldn't tell how much, or when it was introduced. That type of sample is always tricky. It was clearing fast, as usual. I have no idea what it means. Let me know if you hear anything. And be sure to eat something. 'Bye."

"'Tooth Fairy'?" Braumberg insisted.

Knight sighed, "Nat has a perverse sense of humor, at times."

"At least 'perverse'. A lady of courage, that. With a touch of Jewish Mother." Andy grinned, "They're everywhere."

"Are they?" *What makes you say that?*

"Oh, yeah. Do you mind if I look around?"

Immediately Nick forgot the comment, as he felt himself back on guard. *What now?* "You can look."

"I'll try not to mess up anything," Andy promised, as he began to move around.

*I'll see to that,* Knight agreed, watching the other closely.

Braumberg started on the book shelves.

"What makes you think I'm younger?" Andy asked.

"What?"

"I think you're older but, I can't say why. So why do you think I'm younger?"

"There's a certain...openness about you," Nick said. "It's not something our kind keeps for very long."

"Maybe that's it then," Andy nodded, as he read the different titles in his host's library. "Why I think you're older. You and she seem more...." He hesitated too long.

"Reserved?" the blond supplied.

"I'll buy that," Andy said quickly.

"But it's not what you were going to say."

"...No," the guest said reluctantly.

"Then what?"

Braumberg frowned, "You both seem a little...world weary." He sighed, "You *did* ask."

"So I did," Nick agreed. "There's another indication of how young you are. You're a terrible liar."

"Maybe not so terrible," Andy shrugged. "I am still alive. You have some interesting titles here."

Nick only nodded.

"I see the Olmecs and the Toltecs," referring to the books. "Do you have anything as mundane as the Mayans?"

"Over here," Nick said, leading him to a separate bookcase.

"Altun Canal," Andy read softly.

"Do you know it?"

"I seem to," the guest said slowly. "...It's an intriguing culture. And there's so much to learn."

"Yes," Nick agreed. "Have you heard about a special pair of goblets that...."

Suddenly Andy looked away from him and toward the skylight. Knight let himself acknowledge the tickling awareness that had been skirting his mind. He followed the other's gaze.

*Someone is up there.*

"Isn't it a little late for anyone to come calling?" Andy asked softly.

*Someone vampire.* "Wait here," Nick instructed.

"Are you sure?"

"Wait," the blond repeated, as he left the floor.

Nick went up through the window and out onto the roof. The presence was still there. But it was several moments before anyone stepped out of the shadows.

*LaCroix.*

"Good morning," the master vampire greeted.

"What do you want?"

"Really, Nicholas, your manners are atrocious at times. I understand you have a house guest."

"Do you know something about him?"

"Oh, I know a great many things about a great many people. I was pleased to learn that you are finally associating with someone of your own kind, for a change."

*What are you up to?* Knight wondered, as he waited.

"Of course, he's not quite the quality of vampire that you've known in the past. Or present," the master vampire added. "But still, I suppose you could possibly find him of interest."

"Did you have anything to do with his being here?"

"Why would I do that?" LaCroix asked innocently.

"I don't know. I'd like to find out."

The master smiled, "...It grows late. We'll talk another time."

Then LaCroix was gone.

Morning light started creeping across the sky. The detective came down the skylight and closed the shutter. He turned to find Andy looking up at him, the stranger's own feet some eight feet off the floor.

"Anything?" the other asked, as he followed Knight down.

"Nothing that wanted to talk," Nick shrugged.

"...I hope he got away in time."

*There's no doubt about that.* "He?" Knight asked aloud, as he went to his automatic window shades. "How do you know it was a man?"

"I don't," Braumberg said. "Just a generalization."

"But you knew it was a vampire?"

"...Yeah."

"How?"

The other looked decidedly perplexed, "'Cause I knew. ...You knew he was there, too."

"Yes, but the only time I'm aware of other vampires is if," Nick chose his words carefully, "...I'm related to them."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"You knew about me," Andy accused.

"The first time you looked at me, your eyes had a decidedly immortal glow to them."

"Oh."

"How did you know about Janette?"

"That's one pretty lady."

"That she is. But how did you know?"

"Because she felt like a vampire. ...And that's a loaded statement if ever there was one," the other shook his head.

*Agreed.* "How did you know about Natalie?"

"Now *that* pretty lady is mortal."

"Exactly."

Andy made a face. He looked around, searching for an answer among Nick's books.

"Maybe I'm just a good guesser."

"Or maybe," Nick said slowly, "you had a good teacher."

"You think it's a learned trait?"

"If it is, it's something *I* never learned. Do you give lessons?" Knight asked.

"...If I figure it out. But that may take a while."

"At any rate, we don't need to worry about it now. It's been a long night."

"I'll go along with that," Braumberg said, heading back to the sleeper sofa. He started peeling down. "Good night then."

"Good night."

* * *

When Nick awoke he found his guest up before him again. The other had evidently gone exploring in his host's artist's nook.

"You paint," Andy said, "and you're an expressionist. I don't know why that surprises me, but it does."

*'Expressionist'?* Nick thought. *He has some background in art then.*

"I *like* this one," the guest said, pulling out a canvas with a stylized version of the sun. "Are you sure you never sell your work?"

"No." *Not for a very long time.*

"Of course, it's not like I have a place to put it, or even anything to pay you."

The blond shrugged, as he watched Andy study the painting with its flower-like rays of the sun. Not quite expressionistic, since it was still recognizable as a natural object.

*More like art deco,* Nick grinned to himself.

"How about a trade?" the other said suddenly looking at him.

"What?" Knight mumbled, pulled out of his thoughts.

"A portrait of one, or both, of the two ladies for this."

"A portrait?" Nick asked feeling like an idiot. *Since when do you do portraits?*

"Not that I'm that good you understand," Andy apologized, turning back to the canvas. "I never did get the hang of making a patron look more beautiful than he is."

"Part of paying the piper," Knight said, careful not to disrupt the new flow of information. *For both of us.*

"True enough," the other agreed. "Misha said it was because I didn't try."

*'Misha'?* But Andy didn't seem to be aware of anything extraordinary. *Can he be faking it after all?*

"I was fortunate he never forced me. If it came down to that, I'd rather be a model."

"You've done some modeling?" Nick asked cautiously.

Braumberg nodded absently, "Oh, yeah. Mostly for him, you understand. But yeah."

"For Misha?"

"That's right. So, what do you say? Are you willing to trade?"

*Could it be he's remembering because he'snot trying to remember?* "It sounds...more than fair to me."

"Good," Andy grinned. "I'm getting off easy. I won't have to do any sprucing up to either one of them."

"Thank you. For both of them. But I do have a question."

The other sighed, "How am I going to pay for the materials?"

"We'll work something out," Knight waved it aside. "...Who's Misha?"

"He's...," Andy started out easily, then faltered, as he stared at his host. "...He's somebody I know, apparently."

"'Apparently'." *And if you're lying, you're very good at it.*

"Well, it's a name. I know a man named Misha."

"Any last name?"

The other thought about it, "...No. Why am I not surprised?"

"A Russian man named Misha."

"Well, he wouldn't have to be Russian," the guest muttered. "Although it does sound pretty ethnic. Do you suppose I know any Russian?"

In that language, Knight said, "We can try to find out."

And looked at him quizzically, then shook his head, "I know *some* Russian. I understood about every third word."

"A dialect, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"So, what have we got?" Nick summarized, "A Russian man, who knows about painting and probably taught you."

"Why 'probably'?"

"Because you said he never forced you to do portraits. Implying that he could have. So, a position of authority over you."

"Sounds reasonable," Andy nodded.

"Maybe even your master."

"You think so?"

"There's no way to be certain, at this point. But it is a name. I'll tell Janette and see if she can find anything."

Braumberg nodded in agreement, "Okay. But let me ask her. I should be fending for myself more. *And* I want to see her again for the portrait."

"All right. But be careful."

"I will. Now you'd better get a move on. I'm really messing up your routine here."

"I can live with it," Nick smiled, as he hurried for the bathroom.

He came out to find his new friend waving his way out of the spacious apartment.

'*Friend*'? Well, why not? At least until Knight knew differently.

* * *

"So, how's your wayfaring stranger?" Schanke asked, as he settled down in the Cadillac.

"He seems to be doing all right." *Physically, anyway.*

"He still staying with you?"

"Yes. But I don't think he will much longer."

"Gettin' itchy feet, huh?"

"Something like that," Knight shrugged.

"Well, it seems to me that you've been playin' the good Samaritan long enough with this guy."

"Not really, Schankes. As it turns out, he's a distant relative."

"You're kiddin'."

"No, it came up the other night."

"That's too bad," his partner shook his head. "Relatives are a lot harder to get rid of."

"So it seems," Nick said softly, as he became aware of the same presence from the last evening. *LaCroix,* he thought. The master vampire was nearby, watching him. *Why?* There was no way of telling until that vampire let him know.

With an air of long, but not always successful, practice, he put the matter from his mind.

* * *

By the end of his shift, Nick still hadn't shaken the persistent feeling. He went to see Natalie.

"Hi there," she greeted him. "Have you eaten today?"

"And good morning to you, too, fair lady."

She would not be put off. "Have you?"

Knight really hadn't expected the diversion to work. "Not yet."

Natalie nodded, "Just don't forget. How's Andy?"

"I think he's feeling better."

"You could bring him in for another sample, I suppose."

Nick shook his head, "It's doesn't matter. Any trace of drugs would be gone by now."

"Has anything come back to him yet?"

"A few things. And a name, Misha."

"He knows Baryshnikov?" she grinned.

"It's possible," the blond detective shrugged. "He wanted to be the one to tell Janette about it, in case she heard anything."

"Did he?" she mused. "Janette liked him then?"

"I wouldn't say *that*. But she agrees there's something about him...."

"What?"

"I don't know. 'Familiar' is the word Janette used." Knight paused, "...That's almost right. It's as if...," he frowned.

"'As if'?" Nat prompted.

"I don't know," he repeated starting to leave. "See you tomorrow."

"Count on it," she agreed. "And don't forget to eat," she called after him softly.

Nick only waved. She would quiz him unmercifully tomorrow. But right now he was running a little short of time.

The blond went down to his car and headed home. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east. He had enough time to get to shelter. But a little expediency would not go amiss.

Knight was passing the big cathedral, when he caught sight of something near the bell tower. Vampire senses kicked in, as he made out the form of a man flying away from the church.

*Andy?* Surely not.

Vampires didn't enter such places easily. Nick had occasion to in the process of his job. But it had been only bearable at the time.

*Why would Andy...?*

Knight shook his head, trying to cease any speculation until he could question his house guest. Andy was waiting in the loft, sitting at Nick's artist's table.

"I didn't ask if I could use your supplies," the other said.

"Help yourself to whatever you need," Nick replied turning down the curtains.

"Thanks, I'll try to finish it before I leave."

*Oh?* It's not as if he hadn't expect this. Why was he disappointed? "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. But wherever I'm from, it isn't here. It's not right for me to be living off of you."

"You're not costing me that much, and it certainly isn't what I can't afford."

Braumberg pointed to the paints and canvas, "*This* will."

"It's already here. ...I saw you, when I was coming in. You were leaving St. John's."

"Oh yeah," the other said easily. "It's a good looking church."

"Do you," Knight began slowly, "go to church often?"

"I *visit* churches now and again. I only get to Mass once or twice a year. Midnight mass and Easter Vigil, if I'm lucky."

"You go to mass," Nick said skeptically.

"That's right," the other said, looking through some brushes.

*You're lying,* Knight thought. *You have to be.* "And do you receive communion, too?" he asked sarcastically.

"No," Andy said quickly. Then he thought about it. "At least, I don't think so. I really doubt if I've had a successful confession in.... In a long time," he finished. "Why? Have you?"

The question sounded innocent enough. But it was hardly that.

*You have to be lying.* "No," Nick said coldly.

The other only shrugged, "Sorry. I thought maybe you were Catholic."

"I *was*," Nick's tone was ice now.

Andy looked at him a moment. Then he turned back to the paintings.

"Is this canvas okay for me to use?" the other asked evenly.

*No!* Knight thought angrily. *We won't change the subject now.* "You're telling me you have no problems entering a church?"

Andy frowned thoughtfully, "...No. Why do I get the feeling we're not talking about the same thing?"

*Aren't we?* "Come over here."

Andy followed his host to a certain chest of drawers. Opening it, Nick handed him a silk bag.

"Open it," the blond said.

Braumberg did so. He pulled out the rough hewn cross tied together with rope. Gently, he turned it over in his hands, feeling the wood.

"How old is it?" Andy asked.

"Over five hundred and sixty years," Knight said, watching the other closely. *Why aren't your hands burning?*

Thoughtfully, Braumberg nodded, "That's about Joan of Arc's time, isn't it?"

"It was hers." *Why aren't you shaking with pain?*

"It is? You knew her?"

"Yes." *How can you hold it so easily?*

The other seemed totally unaffected by the object, as he turned his attention to Nick himself.

"And she gave this to you?" Andy asked.

"Yes."

"Were you there when she died?"

"Yes," Knight said, turning away.

There was silence behind him for a moment.

But then the other spoke, "There's a tradition about Joan. That when she was being burned, she called out to one of the men in the crowd. He fashioned a cross out of the sticks meant for the fire and held it up for her to see. It's said that his soul was saved that day for that one act of kindness out of a life of corruption."

"It's a nice story," Nick said. *Too bad it isn't true.*

"It's one that I've always remembered."

*Get this over with.* "Give it to me."

"Sure," Braumberg said handing it over.

Nick steeled himself, as the old wood came to rest in his palm. His skin immediately began to sizzle. Fire seared up the nerve endings of his arms. But the pain was cut short, as Andy took the cross out of his grasp, and set it aside.

"Come on," the other said leading him to Nick's sink.

With control, Knight watched his guest pull a bottle out of the huge refrigerator, then pour the contents over Nick's blistered hands.

"You seem to do this with an air of practice," Knight said.

"Oh, I've been burned before, I'm sure. But this...," the other shook his head. "What *is* this?"

"It's what always happens."

"Because of the cross?" Andy asked amazed.

Knight took a breath, "...Yes."

The guest stared at him, still holding the slowly healing hand.

"I've heard it said," the supposedly younger man said, studying Nick's fingers, "that such wounds are psychosomatic."

"I've heard the same thing," Knight said. "It's still hurts."

"Yeah," Andy agreed. "It looks pretty bad, too."

Nick pulled away, shielding his restored limb. *I don't need your pity.*

"But I'd be inclined," Braumberg went on, "to think that it's more a sign of your faith."

"'Faith'?!" Nick spun around angrily. "I have no faith."

"Of course you do," the other smiled. "How else could a piece of wood hurt you by only holding it?"

"Not just a piece of wood. A cross. A symbol of God."

"But still only a symbol," the other countered, "even if once owned by a woman of faith."

Andy rinsed out the sink.

*And yet I noticed how carefully you put down that symbol,* Nick thought.

The other went on, "Your own faith would have to be nearly as great, if you truly believe you're cursed by God."

"I *am* cursed. I gave up my soul for lust and immortality," Knight said bitterly, as he sat in a chair.

"A pretty heady inducement, I agree," Andy nodded, as he put away the bottle.

"And you," the host demanded, "what did you give up?"

"...I don't remember."

"That seems rather convenient. There *is* something you don't really want to remember, isn't there?"

"Could be," Andy admitted. "But remembered or not, I still don't burn when I touch a cross." He frowned thoughtfully, "The Bible mentions a sin that cannot be forgiven. But doesn't say what it is. Have you ever wondered what could be so terrible that God wouldn't forgive?"

"How about the bartering of your soul?"

"I'm not sure that's possible."

"That's easy enough to say for someone who doesn't remember." *Or claims that he doesn't.*

"That's also true," Braumberg said calmly, as he sat facing his host. "But isn't there a certain amount of logic, too? If a soul is what makes you what you are, then wouldn't it be impossible to sell, or give away, something that's intrinsically *you*?"

"It can be done," Nick said with flatly.

Andy still didn't take offense, "I suppose it's a definition of terms. But what hasn't been forgiven? From murder, to perjury, to adultery."

"What about blasphemy?"

"Yeah, that would be high on my list, too," Andy agreed. "But what about...believing that you can't be forgiven?"

*I can't...,* Nick thought, closing his eyes.

"It's something to think about," the other said.

Knight could hear him walk back to the art supplies.

Braumberg went on, "What makes people think they know what God will forgive?"

Then Nick heard the faint scratch of pencil on paper. He looked to find his guest sketching on a pad.

The other said, "The angels in heaven are said to rejoice over one repentant sinner."

"But isn't it arrogance to assume that God will forgive me, just because I repent, even though I knew I was doing wrong to begin with?"

"Good point," Andy conceded, as he continued to move the pencil. "Maybe that's the crux of it all. The uncertainty. It's easier to believe that you're damned, than to believe that you only *might* be damned." He frowned then. "That doesn't sound right."

"No," Knight shook his head. "Damnation doesn't exactly equate with wondering if you're going to get that new sweater for Christmas. I could almost be," he said sadly, "content, if I thought there was even a slight chance...of redemption."

"But surely you do think it," Braumberg countered. "Why else would you do what you do?"

"And what's that?"

"Well, you're a cop for one thing. Why put up with the bureaucracy, if you didn't want to help people?"

"Maybe I'm a power freak."

"Being a vampire is power enough for anyone."

"Do *you* think so?" Knight asked.

"Are you asking what I thought? Or what I think?"

*Oh yes. The memory thing again.* "Do you know what you thought?"

Andy grinned, "Not at the moment, no."

"Then what you think now?"

"...It scares me."

*Does it really?*

The visitor went on, "The potential is for a power too great to be controlled."

"Who says there has to be control?"

"You have to have control, or the power controls you," the other said firmly. He stopped drawing. "I'm sorry. I'm tired. I tend to wax philosophical, when I'm tired."

"You do at that."

"So," Braumberg said getting to his feet, "let's go to bed. We can continue this conversation tomorrow."

"Yes," Nick said softly, as he turned away thoughtfully. *How can you be so different and still be vampire?*

Still thinking, he went to bed.

* * *

It hardly seemed any time at all until he was being roused from his sleep.

*Not only does it take a lot to wake a vampire, we don't wake up in the best of humors,* Knight thought, as he tried to control the instinctive rage at being disturbed.

It took more than a few moments to determine that the teeth rattler was indeed trying only to wake him. And that was only because he was finally able to make out a frantic whisper.

"Nick. Please. Come on, Nick. Wake up."

The blond vampire opened a very, unhappy eye to see an anxious Braumberg standing over him.

"What are you doing?" the detective asked inanely.

"Unless I've forgotten more than I think I have, vampires don't come visiting in the daytime."

"*Vampire*?" But then Knight felt it. That all-too-familiar awareness. *LaCroix.* He got up. "Where?" he asked, looking around.

"There?" Andy pointed.

*At least he's got the good grace not to be sure for a change.*

The presence moved off to the left. Both Nick and the other turned to face it.

"Hello, Nicholas," came a deceptively cheerful voice, as the older vampire stepped out of the dim shadows. "It is a beautiful day, don't you think?"

"If you say so," the blond greeted dryly. *What are you doing here?* his mind screamed.

Braumberg kept silent beside his host.

"Oh yes," LaCroix smiled, as he looked at the visitor.

*Watch out when he smiles.*

"So, this is your house guest," the older vampire said.

"Andy," Nick began, without taking his eyes off the newcomer, "this is LaCroix."

"'LaCroix'?" the other questioned, as if sounding out the name to himself.

"And how are you faring, young duckling?" the master grinned.

The blond detective felt Andy pull back, puzzled more than offended by the odd address.

Nick sighed, "What do you want?"

"Want?" the older vampire repeated in mock offense. "Why should I *want* anything? I was just in the neighborhood and I thought I'd drop in."

*Sure you were.*

"We could," LaCroix went on, "have a friendly discussion. Share a few ideas."

*He knows something about Andy.* "What ideas?"

"I'd like to hear your opinion about a...fairy tale I heard not too long ago."

"What 'fairy tale'?" Braumberg asked softly.

*And Andy thinks so, too.*

LaCroix began with a leisurely sweep into a chair, "A few centuries or so ago, a man was made a vampire not entirely by his own choosing. In truth, he had no choice at all."

"Not even seduction?" Andy asked.

*Be careful!* Nick thought warningly, looking at the other.

"Not even," the older vampire grinned. "Just what his masters had in mind for him will never be known. He killed them directly after the fact."

Nick found himself looking from LaCroix, to Andy, and back again. This recital seemed to be for Braumberg's benefit. But since LaCroix's self-satisfied smirk was aimed mostly at Nick, there had to be some purpose to his being there as well.

*What?*

"Since this rogue should have a name," the other vampire said, "let's call him the Bastard."

"Let's not," Andy muttered.

LaCroix ignored him.

*What are you up to?*

"The Bastard survived more by luck than any knowledge, since he had none. He not only survived, but even became reasonably well versed in vampire ways. After some years, he set for himself the task of finding a companion. Not exactly a novel idea. And not an easy task, for one who had cut himself off from everyone, mortal or not," the master vampire waved his hand dismissively.

"Have *you* ever made such a search?" the visitor asked.

"Not for a very, long time," LaCroix smiled.

"And what do you consider a 'long time'?"

"Almost a millennia."

"All right. I'll buy that," Braumberg conceded.

"At any rate," the older vampire continued, "the Bastard fared badly in his search. Six tries. They all died. Sometimes by his own hand. And then...."

"'And then'?" the visitor urged.

*Come on, LaCroix,* Nick thought. *I know there has to be a point to all this somewhere.*

"And then," the master repeated dramatically, "a street urchin fell across his path. Ignorant, unwashed, the boy was just one of Paris' great number of poor, living hand to mouth. But the Brat did display a willingness to do anything for whatever coins the Bastard might give him."

Knight kept himself resolutely silent. Not so Andy.

"'Anything'?" the other questioned.

"So it was rumored," LaCroix smiled sweetly.

"But you don't *know*," the other insisted.

"I did say this was a 'fairy tale', duckling," the elder said smugly. "Where was I? Oh yes, the Bastard seemed intrigued by this Brat. He took him into his home and eventually turned him. For a time it seemed that the Bastard had found his ideal companion. The Brat affected a curiosity that seemed to cover everything, and anything. It pleased the Bastard to feed that curiosity. Reading, art, literature, history. They traveled. Italy. Spain. Greece. England. Then one night the Brat disappeared."

"Just like that?" Braumberg asked.

"As you say," LaCroix nodded. "So the Bastard began a search. As the years passed, it became apparent that the Brat had not been abducted, or even harmed. He was, in fact, running away from his master."

"Why?" Andy asked.

"Greed. Selfishness," the master shrugged. "The Brat had taken everything he wanted from the Bastard. Money. Skills."

"What skills?" Nick surprised himself by asking.

"Vampire skills, naturally."

"Like being able to detect other vampires?" Nick asked softly. *Something you never taught me.*

"Again, rumors," LaCroix dismissed. "Much like the outlandish tales of the two being able to communicate mentally."

"Did they?" Braumberg asked.

The older vampire only glared at the upstart in answer. Then LaCroix continued, "The Bastard eventually found his errant protégé." He turned his attention to his own child. "Masters do tend to be a tenacious lot."

*Yes, I've noticed,* Knight thought.

"But why?" Andy asked. "Why chase him over how many years?"

"Centuries," LaCroix said.

"And over how many countries?"

"Continents," the master corrected.

The visitor shook his head. "Why not just let him go? Let him try to live on his own...if he thought he could."

*'Thought'?* Nick wondered.

"It's a matter of ownership," the older vampire said coldly. "The master is master always. His children belong to him, always."

The other shook his head, "But what about independence?"

*'Independence'?*

"There is no independence. What is mine is mine forever," he hissed as he stared at Nick.

Knight crossed his arms and waited.

"To continue," the older vampire said, "the Bastard found his Brat. And the Brat killed him."

"No!"

Knight was startled by Andy's vehemence.

LaCroix only smiled, "But of course. It is the nature of our kind to kill. Or *try* to kill," the master added, looking pointedly at Nick.

Andy shook his head. Knight could feel his despair.

"What was his name?" Nick asked.

"The Bastard?" LaCroix asked innocently. "But you know his name."

"...Misha," Braumberg whispered.

The master showed his teeth in assent.

"And the Brat?" the blond detective asked. "What's *his* name?"

"Ask him," the older vampire asked.

Nick frowned, "*You* brought Andy here."

"Of course."

"Why?" the guest asked.

The master appeared to consider an answer, "...An experiment."

"On who?" Knight asked. "Him or me?"

"For you, dear Nicholas."

"Why?"

"Because there are several remarkable similarities between the two of you."

Nick and Andy stared at each other.

*Is that why you seem so familiar?* "What about between you," Knight asked LaCroix, trying a different tack, "and 'Misha'?"

"No," the older vampire said with finality. "There are *none*."

*And why so great a "no"?* the detective wondered. "None at all?" he asked aloud.

"Other than both having ungrateful children, no. And on that note I will leave you."

A swirl of fabric and the master was gone.

Nick turned back to Andy, "Do you remember any of that?"

"No," the other shook his head. "What if he's right?"

"Don't worry about it, until you know," Knight said calmly. "LaCroix isn't always truthful. Get some sleep."

Andy nodded silently, as he went back to the sofa. Knight glanced at him, as he walked to his own bed. He missed watching his guest fall asleep, when he fell asleep himself.

* * *

When Nick woke, he found Braumberg again kneeling on the floor. Quietly, the blond approached the figure and then sat down beside him.

"Andy?" he whispered.

The visitor began speaking even before he opened his eyes, "He called the language Baltic. I never learned enough of it to speak it well. But I did pick up a few choice swear words.

"I talked him into going back to the fishing village where he was born," Andy went on. "Rather he *let* me talk him into it. It was on the Gulf of Riga. A desolate place. The Gobi Desert is lush by comparison. And *cold.* We're not supposed to feel the cold, but that place..." He shook his head. "The wind cut to the bone. Everyone he had known was long dead. Even where his mother was buried was gone." For the first time, the other looked straight at Nick, "And I killed him."

Nick took a breath, "Then you do remember."

"I remember *that.* I remember the feel of the wood in my hands, as I pushed it through his body. I remember seeing him die," the visitor finished.

"Do you remember why?"

"No. But what difference does it make? I killed him," Andy whispered.

"It matters. I don't believe that you'd kill without reason."

"Why not? Neither one of us can be sure what I'd do."

"We're supposed to be alike," Knight smiled. "Remember? And I do try not to kill without cause." *Now.*

"We can't be identical," Andy insisted.

"Why not?"

The visitor studied him a moment, "You're older."

Knight shrugged.

Andy took a breath, "I have to leave."

"Why?"

"I need to get looking."

"Tell you what," Nick said. "Wait until tomorrow. Get a full day's sleep before you start."

The other shook his head, "I've lived off you long enough."

"I'll manage it. Besides, how would you repay me?"

"Send you a few cattle with red ribbons around their necks?"

Nick looked around his pristine apartment. "Please don't."

Andy smiled, "I'll think of something."

"It's not necessary. But stay. One more day."

Braumberg studied him, "Why?"

"I don't want you to go," Knight admitted, "just yet."

"I'd think you'd want me out of your hair."

"Eventually, yes. But for now...it's almost been like having a younger brother around."

"Did you have brothers?"

"I did."

"So did I. I think."

"Is more of it coming back?"

Andy shrugged, "It will. ...You'd better get going, or you'll be late."

"You'll be here, when I get back?"

"I'll be here," Braumberg said lifting his hands.

"And be careful, when you go out," Nick warned. "We can't be sure that all LaCroix wanted was for us to meet."

Andy nodded.

They walked out together, and then parted without a further word, Nick to his Cadillac, Braumberg to the air.

* * *

Knight came home to find his visitor sitting in his art corner. Nick crossed the large room and moved behind Andy, who was sketching again on some paper.

Janette's familiar face looked back at him. Sensual grace marked her bright eyes. But there was another woman in the background. An angular face contrasted sharply with Janette's rich fullness. Dark hair and eyes like Janette's but with a harshness that the other of LaCroix's children had never achieved.

"Who is it?" Nick asked from over the other's shoulder.

Andy sighed, "My Janette."

"*Your* Janette?" *No wonder the name conjured up bitterness.*

"Yeah. Do you suppose I have my own Dr. Nat and Schanke, too?"

*An interesting idea.* "Well, another Natalie wouldn't be so bad. But <u>two</u> Schankes? That's too much."

"He backed you, when you found me," Andy pointed out.

"You're right; of course. Okay. As long as you have a Schanke of your own. I've gotten used to mine."

"I wonder," the other said, "just how much alike we are."

"I expect to hear from you to find out."

"Done."

"To bed. We both missed a considerable amount of rest yesterday."

"Yeah," Andy said without moving.

"What is it?"

"Your Janette was right. There seems to be a lot of things I don't want to remember."

"Like her?" Nick asked pointing to the thin female face.

"Oh yeah. Best to cherish what you have, foster brother of mine. My Janette and I are...not quite...friends."

"And what were you?"

"More than friends. Once."

*Another similarity.* "To bed," Knight repeated.

"To bed," Braumberg agreed and went to the sofa.

* * *

The day passed without any more appearances by LaCroix. Nick couldn't help but wonder if the older vampire wasn't watching from a distance somewhere. Knight got up to find Andy sitting up on the folded couch, fully dressed.

"Ready to go already?" the blond called out.

"Yeah," the visitor said, getting to his feet. "I want to thank you again. For everything. Whatever LaCroix had in mind, I'm glad to have met you."

Nick nodded in agreement, "Do you want to take some extra clothes? I have luggage."

"That's okay. Better to travel light. You take care of yourself."

"You do the same."

Slowly Andy walked to the door.

*He doesn't want to leave either,* Knight thought with satisfaction, as he hurriedly pulled on some clothes.

The other turned to face him.

"Jean Pierre," Andy said abruptly.

"What? Your name?"

"I think so. ...From France," the visitor nodded.

"Paris?" *And if so, how did I miss you?*

"I don't know," Andy sighed. "Maybe."

"It's coming back to you."

"It seems to be."

The two men walked outside and looked up at the sky. The stars sparkled brightly like diamonds on velvet.

*Back to business,* Knight thought pulling himself away from the sight. "There is something else you should keep in mind."

"Besides being careful?" Braumberg smiled.

"Besides," the blond detective agreed. "And possibly more important."

"What?"

"Don't be too sure that Misha is dead."

The other shook his head, "*That* I remember. Very clearly. Too clearly."

"Not very long ago, I thought I had killed LaCroix. I was sure of it, in fact."

"I can't..." Andy denied.

"LaCroix tells his stories to serve his own purposes. You can never be sure they are entirely the truth." *Or entirely not true either.*

"Why would he lie?"

"I couldn't begin to guess." *Even imagining that I understand how LaCroix thinks is enough to give me a headache.* "Just...don't be too sure."

"And what do I do, when I find out he really is dead?"

"Cope with it," Knight shrugged, "the way you have."

"Amnesia, for instance?' the other asked skeptically.

"You'll find a way."

"I'm glad you're so sure."

"You *will*," Nick said, surprised himself at his own certainty. *Because I would.*

"...Good-bye then. And thank you," Andy said holding out his hand.

*Vampires don't shake hands.* "And for me," Nick said softly, taking it.

"I'll remember you."

"I hope so." *Because I doubt I'll forget you.*

The other slipped his hand out of the gentle grip and stepped away. He took to the air without a word and then was gone.

"Did you like him, Nicholas?"

Knight turned to find LaCroix watching him.

*Who else?* "Yes, I did."

"I suppose you would have to."

"Why? Because we're so much alike?"

"That would be a reason, too. Yes."

"Why *did* you bring him here?" Nick asked.

"So you could see what you might have been."

"We're not that much alike. But you and Misha now...."

"No, Nicholas," LaCroix said firmly. "I am older and stronger than his master ever dreamed of being."

*Hit a nerve, have I?* "Maybe. It does make me wonder about his effect on Andy versus your effect on me."

"Is there a difference?" the older man asked innocently. "Seduction is still seduction. What makes you think immortality and lust weren't incentives for him, as well?"

*You hear everything, don't you?* "I don't know," Nick admitted. "But there *is* a difference."

"That there is, Nicholas. And the overwhelming difference is that I am still very much alive," LaCroix grinned with self-satisfaction.

"Can you prove that Misha is dead?"

"I don't have to," the master shrugged. "All you need to know is that *I* am still here."

Nick sighed, *You certainly are that.* "What about Andy?"

But LaCroix was gone.

* * *

Over the next few weeks Knight received several postcards from his wandering roommate, as the other traveled west.

From Michigan:

*I like the mountains,*
*trees and snow. And ice*
*skating. Andy*

Nick noticed how he used the assumed name. But the blond vampire had to admit that was the way he, himself, tended to think of his temporary visitor.

From Oregon:

*The ocean is beautiful.*
*How could I have forgotten*
*this? Andy*

From San Francisco, a picture, not of the Golden Gate, but of Alcatraz:

*Too rocky to be that fishing*
*village. But it has much the*
*same feel. Andy*

And then finally a card from Disneyland, in the familiar writing:

*Tell Schanke he has a cousin*
*in Los Angeles. You were right.*
*Nick*

***Nick?***

**~ The End ~**

# Encounter

*by*

*Denysé Bridger*

***England - 1889***

**The heavy darkness in the London sky** had been threatening rain all day, now, late in the evening, the promise remained unfulfilled. But it was there. Like so many other threats looming within the shadows. As he watched, the storm-grey above him deepened, and a gust of wind tore swaths of white cloud to shreds and tossed them carelessly into the emerging maelstrom, until they lost their airborne wildness and settled over the ground in a shroud of fog. Amid the swirl of night-cooling, rain-laden air, he stood, waiting and watching. The Hunter, poised for confrontation, wishing fervently for peace, and completely aware that it was the latter which would be denied him.

He was an impressive figure in his solitary stance against the world. Tall, and straight, alert to all that drew breath in the sprawling city. If anyone had been permitted to venture close, they would have been surprised by the guardian who held vigil against the unseen evils that plagued their safe existence. He was a handsome man, with dark, aged eyes that saw everything and gave back very little. Despite the ancient wisdom that resided in him, his face was young; smooth, contoured planes striking in quality. He was dressed in the colours of the stormy night, and a wide-brimmed hat shaded his features further. His muscular form was given disguise by the fluttering, full length coat that added to the aura of mystery and danger that emanated from him.

It had been a night much like this, less than a season past, when his life had been altered in the most painful of ways. The woman he'd grown to love had died, in his arms, after a savage attack – by him. Gabriel Van Helsing felt the anger and the agony searing his soul yet again when the ethereal face of Anna Valerious swam into focus before his mind's eye, blotting out the turbulent sky with her stunning beauty. As always, tears rose to make the image shimmer and glow, until it shattered with the falling of a single salt-tanged droplet of moisture, then he swallowed the rest of the endless swell of loss that wanted to pour forth in the wake of this tiny concession to grief.

Van Helsing pushed aside the weakness that threatened to consume and paralyze him, turning his attention outward. To the night, and the evil that darkness spawned with such careless abandon. He could feel the presence of his latest assignment, an ancient warlock who preyed on the idle rich of London society, growing wealthy and more powerful with each life that succumbed to his dangerous charm. In the distance, the massive tower clock called Big Ben chimed the eleventh hour.

The Hunter's steps echoed on the cobblestones as he strode through the heavy night air, his passing ruffling the dense churning of white mist that coiled and writhed on the ground. As he moved, steady, graceful, and lethal, Van Helsing tugged his hat a little further down on his forehead, obscuring his features in shades of deep grey and black shadow. It hadn't been so long ago that he'd walked these streets in search of Mr. Hyde, the darker side of the Queen's physician, Dr. Jekyll. Like so many others,

it wasn't a particularly welcome or wanted memory. That hunt had ended in Paris, with the monster Hyde vanishing and the old man who was Dr. Jekyll lying dead on the street. No doubt the reward for Van Helsing's capture had risen considerably after that assignment.

Van Helsing stopped suddenly, a new scent reaching him amid the potent mix that was uniquely London. He shuddered, the response just beyond his ability to control it, and anger rose with shocking intensity and scope. His senses, always uncannily keen, had remained sharper than ever after his brief time cursed to being a werewolf. And, the scent that stirred his madness was once again drifting to him on the damp breeze. Despite the certainty that it was preposterous, he felt a moment of real fear as he pondered the possibility that Count Vladislaus Dragulia had survived their battle. As quickly as the absurdity formed in the recesses of his mind, he shut it away and hastened his footsteps to a run.

A scream ripped the low-level drone of night sounds in the Great City, and for a single instant, Van Helsing's heartbeat leaped wildly. He contained the sensation of frozen horror, and reached inside his long cloaking coat, his pulse steadying in response to the feel of solid reality against his gloved hand as he drew a shining silver gun and approached the alley that loomed before him. He listened, straining his acute hearing for some telltale sign of what he would encounter in the next seconds. All he heard was the low, sighing breath of a dying girl. He stepped into the mouth of the alley, legs braced apart, booted feet silent now, in spite of the weight they supported. (Man and his weapons were no light load.)

A red haze of blood-drenched fury tinted Van Helsing's vision and he lifted the gun and fired at the creature bent over the dying girl. He absorbed the shock and the vision as he moved toward the vampire; for he was in no doubt that what he had interrupted was a feeding creature of the night. He'd thought them all dead when Dracula was destroyed, but now realized it had been an uncharacteristically naive belief to assume that one vampire had spawned all who might walk the earth. The silver-haired head of this creature rose, and Van Helsing stopped moving for an instant when he was transfixed by the hypnotic power of the vampire's blazing eyes. They shone with preternatural brightness in the shadows, one minute molten gold fire, then the ice of winter-blue skies.

With an effort of will, Van Helsing shook off the mental hold and advanced swiftly. The creature was startled just enough to slow his reflexes, and Van Helsing's gun fired again in a quick volley of bullets. The vampire was flung back against the wall by the impact of the attack and the Monster Hunter delved into his coat a second time. This time he produced a heavy silver stake and triggered the lethal point as he leaped toward the creature.

Van Helsing was airborne when he was slammed hard into the nearest stone wall by a new arrival. Stunned, he shook his head and tried to discern what was happening around him.

"LaCroix! Go!"

"Not before I finish this, Nicholas."

Van Helsing trembled inside at the malevolence in that rich, cultured voice. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he was finally able to see the semblance of forms in the narrow space of the alley. He was being held against the building, one-handed, by a fair haired man. At the mouth of the alley, blocking any exit, stood a woman who was equal to Anna Valerious in her beauty and stature. She looked every bit as fierce and formidable, as well.

Van Helsing reacted on instinct and flung the stake toward the man who had been his first target. A roar of fury rose in the night and he was slammed harder into the brickwork at his back. For several beats of time, Van Helsing held onto consciousness, then he lost his battle and the gaping abyss of true blackness swallowed him.

"LaCroix?"

Janette was at their master's side before the last echoes of his scream of pain had faded into the night. She pulled the stake free of his chest and flung it aside, then turned to look at the man who now lay at Nicholas' feet. Her fangs elongated and her eyes shimmered, their enhanced vision sharpening further in the space of time it took for her true nature to emerge. She walked to the former knight's side and was reaching for Van Helsing when she was pushed away.

"Get LaCroix to safety," Nicholas ordered harshly. "I'll take care of this."

"I want him dead, Nicholas!" She snarled in contempt. "And I want to savour the pleasure myself."

"No," Nick positioned himself between his beautiful lover and the fallen hunter. He was shocked himself by his defense of the mortal, but something deep in his soul was demanding that he keep the man alive. He winced unconsciously when he heard the growl of his vampire father ripple the night air, and for an instant he looked in that direction. His stomach twitched in response to the sight of LaCroix ripping the girl's throat out and gorging on her blood. The ancient vampire's healing would be rapid with the veritable feast he was indulging in at that moment.

In the distance, police whistles were blaring, and Nick knew they had only precious minutes to get away from the scene of this grisly murder.

"Take him back to the estate, Janette," he ordered firmly. "I'll follow you."

She was still glaring at him, and Nick shuddered imperceptibly at the low, guttural rumble of her vampiric anger. He waited, unmoving, and finally she went to their vampire father and bent to touch his shoulder. LaCroix's head rose and he smiled at Nick for a moment, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth as he silently dared his knight to reproach him.

"Come, LaCroix," Janette murmured. "Nicholas will finish him for what he's done to you."

LaCroix straightened, stumbled a little before he righted himself, then drew Janette close to his side. They rose in a graceful arc, and vanished into the cloud-strewn sky.

"Who are you?"

Nicholas turned to peer at the mortal, surprised to find the man was standing again and had a crossbow aimed at his heart. For an eternity that spanned centuries in the space of seconds, the two men stared at each other. Nick's heart, inert for decades, perhaps centuries, suddenly surged to painful life in his chest, and the savage, pounding beat almost deafened him for timeless moments.

Van Helsing looked into the unnaturally bright blue of the fair-haired man's eyes and his breath caught in his throat. It was impossible, but he felt undeniable recognition as he stared into the fathomless depths of the vampire's eyes. The night dropped away and he was standing on a battlefield, the armourment of the Templar Knights weighing on his body... and ***this*** man was at his side, sword drawn as they faced a common enemy...

"It's not possible," Van Helsing breathed, shaken to the core of his spirit.

"Do you intend to use that?" Nick asked, his eyes flitting to the crossbow.

Again, the sense of drowning and flying assailed Van Helsing. His own voice whispered a more recent memory to him: *"My life, my job, is to vanquish evil. I can* ***sense*** *evil. This thing, this man, whatever it is, isn't evil. Evil may have created it. May even have left its mark on it. But evil does not rule it. So I cannot kill it..."* He'd been right then, and he knew he was right now. The man/vampire before him, awaiting his judgement, was not truly a thing of pervading evil. Not as the other vampire he'd sensed and confronted in this alley. Van Helsing didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed, and refused to examine the paradox more closely. Trusting instinct, he shook his head and said very softly, "I can't."

Nicholas leaned closer, confusion evident on his features.

"Who are you?" He heard the dread that textured the soft query, but he ignored it and waited for an answer.

"Van Helsing." He paused, and with equal reluctance, asked the same question of the man before him.

"Nicholas deBrabaunt," Nick whispered, the reply extracted from a part of his soul that he'd thought long gone.

Total understanding passed between them, and went unacknowledged by words or reaction.

"Why are you here, Hunter?" he asked when Van Helsing made no effort to say anything further.

"I'm hunting," Van Helsing's smile reflected the irony in his tone and he shouldered his crossbow. "Have you ever heard of a man calling himself Mandrake?"

Nick's smile was an echo of Van Helsing's sardonic humour. He nodded.

"Try the old Carfax Estate," he suggested. "The owner died recently, and Lord Rupert Avondale is restoring it," he informed Van Helsing, knowing the hunter didn't actually have a name for his prey, and that this would insure he pursued and eradicated the right man.

"Thank you."

Nicholas nodded curtly, glanced over his shoulder, and pointed.

"You might want to leave before they find you here," he commented.

Before the words did more than register, Van Helsing felt the shift in the air that told him he was alone again. He pulled out his grappling gun and aimed at the roof. He was swinging over the edge as the alley began to fill with policemen.

"You dropped this."

He turned in time to catch his wide-brimmed black hat as Nicholas tossed it and swirled away in a current of displaced air. Smiling grimly, Van Helsing donned the hat and tugged it down on his forehead.

"Carfax it is," he murmured to the darkness and turned his attention back to the man he'd been assigned to hunt down and destroy...

~ The End ~

# Blood Game

by

*Denysé M. Bridger*

**Heaven in the eyes of a monster**
**How many have fallen before you?**
**I want to flee**
**To run from a madness I sense is as imminent as your touch**
**You hear the fear within my mind don't you?**
**The answer is in your eyes**
**Those blue oceans that threaten to drown my sanity**

**Death in the arms of evil**
**How many have fallen before you?**
**I cling to you**
**Desperate to hold the ecstasy you have taught me**
**You heard the surrender long before I knew**
**I read it in your eyes**
**Those glowing fires that seared my soul and claimed my spirit**

**Hunger cloaked in the shadow of night**
**They fall before us now**
**Laughter fills the silent gloom**
**We run as one**
**You teach the blood game well**
**The madness lives within your eyes**
**Those empty, soulless gems that stole my life from me**

# Siren Song

by

*Denysé M. Bridger*

My search for you
led me through time itself.
Past countless souls,
who might have offered me joy.
I saw none who loved me,
only the emptiness of what I lacked.
I waited and knew,
that one life would soon lead to others.
My search for you
gave me the strength to endure,
The endless years
required to grasp recognition.
I saw none who desired me,
only the spectre of an unknown lover.
I waited and hoped,
that one day you would lay claim.
My search for you
led me into the night.
Past countless souls,
who might have saved me from you.
I saw none who loved me,
only the promise of eternal passion.
I waited and knew,
that I'd always be yours.
I tried to fight your possession,
refused the surrender my heart demanded.
You became my obsession,
the madness that rules my existence.
My search for you,
led me through time itself.
You offered eternity
all I want is your love.

# Demon on the Hill

*by*

*Margaret L. Carter*

*[Editor's Note: "Demon on the Hill is a sequel to "Payer of Tribute," which appears earlier in this volume. It is reprinted from THE VAMPIRE JOURNAL 4 (Summer 1988) published by Baker Street Publications.]*

**Smoke hung in the air of the pub.** Isobel Craig and Ian Moreland, topping off a late supper with mugs of Guinness, sat at a table off to one side, unregarded by the locals. Isobel had lost interest in the place as soon as she'd learned it was no Olde Englishe Inn, but a construction of postwar vintage. The oak-beamed ceiling betokened, not antiquity, but self-conscious "atmosphere." The obligatory dartboard was faced on the opposite wall by a jukebox and a couple of video games. The pub projected a downright touristy aura, though one wouldn't imagine many tourists flocking to a little town several hours north of London.

Well, Isobel thought, I could hardly expect to meet Fielding and Dickens everywhere. This is, after all, the twentieth century.

With her month's vacation in England drawing to a close, she'd finally persuaded Ian to bring her to Corville. Ian was proving a disappointment. Though amiable enough in his willingness to show off his native land to a long-time pen pal, he had no sense of the romantic.

Look who's talking, Isobel derided herself. Some adventurer you are, too timid even to rent a car and learn to drive on the wrong side of the road.

Her "adventures" so far were confined to the realm of imagination. A graduate student in English literature, she was ostensibly pursuing local folklore to incorporate into her dissertation. Her true motive for visiting Corville, however, was personal. So far, her long-anticipated interlude before settling down to the career she'd mapped for herself had been tame. Would this climactic visit measure up to her fantasies? Finishing her drink, she brushed her long, black hair back over her shoulders and said, "If you're done, can we head for the castle now?"

"Still set on that?" said Ian. "As if you couldn't get any solid information you needed in the comfort of the British Museum reading room?"

"You know why I want to visit Castle Corville," she said. "And you did promise."

"So I did," he said with a wry smile. "Must have been off my head. It's starting to rain out there. And there won't be anything worth seeing. The barman tells me that the castle's nothing much more than a heap of stones. One tower standing, that's all. I can show you a score of more interesting ones, comfortably fitted up for tourists, at that."

Though she knew he was teasing, she felt slightly irritated. "Come on, Ian, I'm not here to sit around drinking Guinness. I could do that back home in Virginia."

"Well, how can I deny the claims of chivalry?" He drained the dregs of his stout and pushed his chair back. Isobel surveyed his sandy-haired, freckled handsomeness with mild affection. This wasn't the only

occasion during the past month when he'd gone out of his way for her, haring off for a side trip that interested him little. He indulged her, she sensed, because he hoped to become more than a friend. So far she'd fended off the hands around her waist, the fingers grazing her breast, without open conflict. His good-humored acceptance of rebuffs further endeared him to her, and she left open the possibility of a closer tie with him.

Standing up, she noticed a tall, dark-haired man leaning against the bar. He caught her eye because he was the only man present wearing a suit. No tie, a turtleneck shirt instead, but unmistakably a black suit. He looked incongruous there, holding a beer stein, flanked by jeans-clad young working men. His eyes, raking the room, came to rest on Isobel. He straightened up and impaled her with his stare. She froze, half-standing, one hand clutching the table, and returned his unblinking gaze. In the pit of her stomach, a core of heat began to glow. She must be losing touch with reality if a stranger's look could engender this tingling warmth, when Ian's touch left her cool. The man's lips moved as if speaking directly to her, though with the buzz of conversation and pounding of rock music, she could hear no words. The man's eyes left hers and resumed their impersonal scanning of the room.

Only then could she turn to Ian. "What do you think of that man by the bar?" she said, her voice quavering through her attempt to speak lightly. "Looks pretty out of place, doesn't he?"

"What man, luv?"

She looked back toward the bar. He was gone. "Nothing. I don't see him now. Let's go."

A steady drizzle dampened them on the way to Ian's Peugeot. As the car crawled along the narrow streets, he said, "Don't know why you couldn't wait till daylight to view your ancestral holdings."

"Oh, cut it out, Ian. You know I never claimed the castle belonged to my family. We have a tradition associated with it, that's all."

"The Demon on the Hill," said Ian with a satiric tinge in his voice.

"That's the title my D.A.R. great-aunt gave to the tale. She was the clan genealogist, collected every family legend she could dig up, as long as it was old enough not to be a scandal anymore."

"Fancied herself a romance writer, didn't you say?"

"Yes," said Isobel. "She did write up the stories in narrative form, but they were never published."

"Then chances are she embellished," Ian maintained. "Especially a piece of lore that supposedly comes down from the Dark Ages." Isobel had first begun to correspond with Ian because of their mutual interest in medieval witchcraft trails. She'd soon learned. However, that he specialized in the economic and social wellspring of those persecutions and didn't share her enthrallment with the occult itself. On any subject that approached the supernatural, he was an incorrigible wet blanket.

"Well, the town is here, and so's the castle," said Isobel, gazing out the window as they passed from the last of the haloed streetlamps to the unilluminated open road.

"Still inhabited by a demon?" Ian teased.

"Who knows what the demon really was?" Isobel said. "According to the tradition, he demanded tribute from the village in the form of nubile maidens. In return, he was their protector, in accepted feudal style; they even referred to him as 'Lord Demon.' This went on for years, until one of the sacrificial victims fell in love with him. Her courage impressed him so much that the feeling was mutual." Hearing the intensity in her own voice, despite the many times she had reread and retold the legend, she pressed a rain-dampened palm to her flushed cheeks.

"The lady you're named for," Ian grinned.

"Well, yes, it's been a recurring name in our family for as long as we've kept records. Anyway, the original Isobel supposedly lived with the demon for quite a long time, until a mysterious sickness struck the children and old people of the village."

"In that era," said Ian, "any illness besides the common cold was 'mysterious.' Could have been plague, or who knows what."

"Whatever it was, the townspeople blamed the demon and Isobel, so they thought, had been bewitched into becoming a rapacious monster, too. They gathered up their courage to storm the castle by day —"

"Why day?"

"He was a night demon; he lost his powers after sunrise. They couldn't find him, but they got Isobel. They dragged her to the village square, with the local priest leading the pack, and burned her alive."

"But they never got the demon?"

"It's said he ravaged the town for one night and then disappeared."

"So you think you're a changeling of some kind, descended from 'demon'?" said Ian with a sidelong smile.

"Of course not, Isobel replied impatiently. "Isobel never had children by her inhuman lover. We're supposed to be descended from her sister."

"As a legend, it's not too satisfactory," said Ian. "Too many loose ends."

"That's why I think it may actually be based on some stratum of truth."

"What truth? A fiend who eats girls? It's a 'Beauty and the Beast' variant, that's all."

"Well, I'm here to visit the Beast's lair. How much farther?" She peered through the rain-slicked windshield.

"Only a mile or two more," said Ian. "But, as I said, there won't be much to see, just an uninspiring pile."

"I know, the Corvilles, the Norman family who claimed the fief after the Demon disappeared, died out a long time ago," she sighed. "Did the bartender mention any local lore connected with the place?"

"Sorry, luv, not a whisper," Ian said with a sidelong smile. "No haunted Gothic castles whatever."

The car hummed to a stop on a curve beneath the dropping limbs of an oak tree. "From here on we have to walk," Ian grumbled. "If I'd known you'd insist on coming here at night. I'd have dressed for it." After reaching across her lap to open her door, he got out and leaned against the hood, hunching his shoulders against the drizzle. Scraps of cloud partly obscured the moon, but with Ian's direction, Isobel could barely glimpse a darker shape in the darkness a few hundred yards away. Ian switched on a flashlight and stumped across the field toward the remains of the castle.

"Maybe this was a hill eight hundred years ago," he said, "but it's leveled off since. Thank God for small favors. You know, if your Demon on the Hill was real, he was probably a human ogre along the lines of Gilles de Rais. Probably ravished and murdered girls the way old Gilles did boys. Just because the word 'sadism' hadn't been invented then doesn't mean the thing didn't exist."

"I can't believe that," said Isobel, clutching his sleeve to support her across the pot-holed, weed-covered ground. "Isobel, my namesake, wouldn't have stayed with him willingly if he were like that. I think the villagers were ungrateful brutes. According to the legend, the Lord Demon protected them from outlaws and ensured the prosperity of the town."

"Good grief, you really believe the tale," Ian chuckled.

"Not quite," she said. "But at least I try to take it on its own terms, not impose irrelevant prejudices on it." She was surprised at the heat with which she championed a character that was probably imaginary.

She thought defensively, why not? With my own life in such a rut, I need the occasional relief of identifying with something a little more exciting.

"Well, here we are," said Ian. "Take a quick look around so we can get back to a dry room, drinks, and bed."

She heard a playful leer in the last word. If he was expecting to take that kind of advantage of this overnight excursion, he'd be disappointed. Archaic as it sounded, even to herself, Isobel was "saving herself" for a special occasion and person, though she had no clear image of what that would comprise. Taking the flashlight from him, she played it over the moss-mottled stone before them. As he'd predicted, all that remained of the keep was a portion of roofless courtyard, along with a single tower that appeared intact.

"What did I tell you?" said Ian after a moment's silent contemplation. "If you were an archaeologist, this mess might give you some data, in daylight. But since neither of us is, what do you say we go back now?"

"This is just the right atmosphere for appreciating it," she said. "I'm going inside."

"And have what's left of the roof fall on you?"

"Don't be such a worry-wart." She stepped forward, the wet grass squishing underfoot.

He grabbed her arm. "All right, I surrender. We can come back in the morning."

His common sense struck her (irrationally, she knew) as timidity. She shook him off. "I'm exploring it right now. You can wait here or go back to town and pick me up later, for all I care."

"What do you mean, later?" His impatience was shifting to exasperation.

"I've decided to stay awhile and soak up the vibrations. Since you'll probably melt if you get any wetter, you'd best go back to the pub and dose yourself with a few more beers."

"'Soak' is the word, all right! Look here, you can't stay by yourself. I heard the locals talking about some kind of mini-crime-wave they've been having. Women assaulted, vandalism of livestock, that kind of thing. It's not safe."

"In that case, you'd better get going. Wouldn't want my romantic silliness to get you in trouble."

"Girl, you're bloody daft." She thought she could near his teeth gnashing.

She caught herself smiling at his frustration. "I'm staying."

"All right, be an idiot. What the hell do I care? Walk back to town when you're good and ready!" He whirled around and stalked to the car. She heard him stumble a couple of times, muttering curses.

As the Peugeot roared away, Isobel wondered why she'd deliberately picked a fight with Ian. Was she hunting for an excuse to explore the ruin alone? He was right; the notion was harebrained. Yet she longed to break out of her predictable, rationally planned life pattern just once. Upon returning home, she would resume her graduate studies, complete her doctorate, and settle down to a career of teaching freshman composition to classes who considered the requirement a penal sentence, if she proved lucky enough to find a job at all. And for what? Not for pride of family; since her parents' death, she had no family. For her own self-esteem? At occasional, terrifying moments, the academic success that had once absorbed her seemed a barren ritual. This ill-advised fling, atypical of her well-behaved, biddable personality, would demonstrate to herself that she was at least capable of breaking the pattern.

A low growl of thunder reminded Isobel of the discomfort attendant on this "adventure." Her hair was already plastered to her head with dampness. Fortunately, the night was warm, or her University of Virginia T-shirt wouldn't have provided enough protection. Picking her way with the flashlight's beam, she made for the right angle formed by the two fragments of wall still intact next to the tower. At the foot of the tower, a lightless gap opened into a stairwell. Her nervous energy abruptly evaporated, leaving her with no desire to grope her way up the rubble-strewn stairs. To the certainly of dust and cobwebs within, her imagination added the possibility of vermin. Poisonous spiders? Foot-long rats with stiletto fangs? She could soak up atmosphere right on this spot.

She huddled in the V of the two walls, hugging her knees. How long should she sit here, for honor to be satisfied, before starting the wet hike back to Corville? A momentary shiver convulsed her at the thought of the hypothetical miscreants prowling the night between here and the town. Ridiculous. Even if Ian hadn't been embroidering the truth to scare her, her risk was negligible, since no one else knew she was here. Thunder pealed, louder this time. She counted to "thousand seven" before the lightning flashed.

I sure can't complain of any lack of Gothic atmosphere, she reflected.

She flashed the light over the heap of stones and said aloud,

"Here's to you, Lord Demon, wherever you are."

"On his behalf," said a voice from the foot of the tower, "I thank you."

Isobel gasped. Her hand tightened spasmodically on the flashlight. A figure stepped out of the shadowed stairwell. It was the black-clad man from the pub. Supporting herself with one hand on the slick stones behind her, she stood up. He stepped toward her.

"Who? What are you doing here?"

He folded his arms and replied with a sardonic quirk of his mouth, "As the owner, I might better ask you that."

"I thought this place was abandoned."

"I took possession of the keep a little more than two months ago," he said. "I have ambitions to restore it to its authentic medieval style. Meanwhile, I've made a few rooms in the tower habitable." His eyes weighed and measured her. "You are an American student?"

She emitted a nervous giggle, detesting herself for it. "Is it that obvious?"

"Your accent betrays you. And who but a scholar would take such an interest in this place, under such inclement conditions?"

"I'm studying the area's folklore. That's how I happen to know about the, the Demon on the Hill. Funny that the locals don't seem to have kept the story alive."

"Isn't it?" he agreed coolly. "How, then, do you know it?"

"My family was involved with the story," she said. "It's come down through the centuries, though of course we can't be sure how distorted it is. My name is Isobel Craig."

"Isobel." His eyes caught and held hers, as they had in the tavern. "You may call me Reynard."

The offering of first name only seemed unconventional, at best, yet she couldn't bring herself to ask for more. His eyes were sucking her into a whirlpool, blotting out the castle, the weeds, the rain, the thunder. Her head swam as if from too much wine. In a nauseating rush, the ground plunged upward at her.

She felt as if she were floating. When her vision cleared, she saw the drenched moon winking in and out before her eyes, vanishing and reappearing through chinks between the stones. She realized she was being carried up the tower stairs.

Reynard set her down in a brocade-covered, wing-backed armchair. She smelled a scent like perfumed oil, accompanied by a flare of clear but somehow off-color light. After a moment's blinking as her pupils contracted, she realized he had lit a kerosene lamp. Beside her, a freshly replenished fire blazed in a hearth large enough to stand in. An oval Oriental rug covered the center of the floor, and the stone walls were partly veiled by tapestries portraying various phases of a stag hunt. The chair, its mates scattered about the room, and a circular marble-topped table at her elbow seemed authentic Victorians, while the sideboard on which Reynard had lit the lamp suggested the eighteenth century. His idea of "habitable" seemed both opulent and eclectic.

Pouring red wine from a decanter, he crossed the room and fitted the goblet into her hand. He stared at her until she'd tasted the wine, its tannic harshness shocking her fully awake. "Better now, I trust?"

She nodded, feeling heat flood her cheeks. She'd never fainted before, and embarrassment at being found trespassing hardly seemed excusable enough for her collapse. She forced herself to meet his eyes. What color were they? Gray, she'd thought at first, but that word sounded too flat. She thought she discerned a metallic sheen as the firelight caught them. As he turned to fill a glass for himself, though, she glimpsed a tinge of violet in the gray.

Idiot, she told herself. Woolgathering, nobody has violet eyes.

"So your lineage has some tie with the Demon of this place? In what way?"

She felt like crystal, resonating to the sound of his voice, in danger of shattering if the vibrations intensified. She sipped her drink to dispel the illusion. "My mother's family was supposed to be descended from the sister of the Demon's mistress." In a rush of words, she confessed her lifelong fascination with the woman she'd been named for.

An expression that might have been tolerant amusement or something more complex played on his lips. "And do you believe the tale?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I couldn't bear to see it proved impossible. That would make the world so — limited."

"Then your visit here is in the nature of a personal quest?"

"Yes, and I do want to believe the legend," she admitted more openly than she'd ever done to Ian. "I'm like that theologian —who was it? If nothing else, I'll believe <u>because</u> it's impossible.'

"Isobel Craig," he chuckled, "for the time and place you come from, you are indeed unusual."

"You must have a reason for buying this keep and planning to restore it," she said. "Do you know something about Corville that I might not?"

His voice hardened. "The account I know is substantially the one your family has preserved; that Isobel was foully murdered because of her neighbors' superstitious fears." He paused before continuing more lightly, "I have only one piece of information not available to you, the precise floor plan of the castle, which I hope to recreate. But as your field is not architecture, that should strike you as no great

lack."

"No, my knowledge of castle-building is no more than general," she said. "But I do wish I could be here to see the completed reconstruction. Not much chance, but who knows if I'll ever visit England again?" She tilted her head at a crack of thunder that sounded nearer than any she'd heard so far.

"The storm worsens,' said Reynard. "Since you are my involuntary guest, I mustn't neglect my duties as host. I've furnished several rooms, and I can offer you a bed."

Her eyes widened in an alarm of which she was instantly ashamed. Simultaneously, a secret warmth again stole through her.

"Surely you weren't planning to spend the night in the courtyard, and you cannot return to the village in this weather." He lit a taper from the lamp and walked toward the door. "Come along, I'll show you."

She followed him into a circular vestibule surrounding the stairwell. He opened another door to reveal a bedchamber, tapestried and carpeted, furnished with the same overblown elegance as the first room. The bed actually bore a canopy. Here, too, a fire was burning.

"It lacks your American luxuries," he said, "although, fortuitously, the installation of plumbing is complete." He gestured toward a smaller door in a corner.

"Our 'luxuries' were never like this," she muttered, fingering the velvet upholstery of a chair against the wall.

Reynard set the candle on the nightstand. "I shall leave you now, since you must be tired. I only regret that the door cannot be bolted."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she said. "I feel — safe." The word belied her true emotions, though what a more accurate term would be, she didn't know.

Reynard took her hand and bowed over it, not quite kissing it. This was the first time he'd touched her since carrying her upstairs. His fingers were cool. She sensed his awareness of her quickening pulse, and blood rushed to her cheeks.

When he was gone, she quickly stripped off her damp clothes, laid them flat on a bare section of floor, and washed sketchily. Naked, she slipped between the cool sheets. Their roughness startled her; natural fabric, she realized, cotton or linen. Her eyes ached with the candle's undulations. She rose on one elbow to blow it out, then lay back and closed her eyes against the ebbing fire, as her inner flame ebbed in unison. Within minutes, she was asleep.

She awoke utterly disoriented. In the windowless dark, it took her a moment to realize that the red glow she saw was no hallucination, but the embers on the hearth. She was in Castle Corville.

I'm dreaming, she told herself. Except this is a dream outside the mind.

She heard the sigh of the heavy door opening. A shape obscured her view of the fire. She sat up with a stifled cry.

"If you scream," said Reynard matter-of-factly, "there is no one to hear."

She lay down again. "I don't want to scream." Now his eyes were neither gray, violet, nor silver. They glowed red, like the embers.

Of course, she mused. How else could they look in this waking dream?

Instantly, with no sense of motion, he was at her side. He sat on the edge of the bed and imprisoned one of her wrists in his hand. "There is one more fact your family legend failed to preserve," said Reynard. "That is, what, precisely, the so-called Demon demanded of his paramours."

"I think I can guess," said Isobel.

He leaned over her. "And you don't resist? Do you consider your soul of so little value?"

"I've told you, I don't believe the first Isobel was damned,' she said. "And I know what I want."

"Do you? A rare trait." His free hand stroked her hair and moved caressingly along her jaw line. He bent as if to kiss her. Heedless of her nudity, she let the sheet slip down as she reached up to embrace him. The darkness held only two sources of light, the dying fire and his eyes. She was falling, falling, though his arms held her. A roar that was not thunder reverberated in her lead. She felt an icy sting that instantly dissolved into aching sweetness. The dark engulfed her.

When she floated back to awareness and opened her eyes upon the lurid dimness, Reynard was gazing down at her.

"Isobel," he said. "You are so like her. I could almost believe you are she."

"I don't believe in reincarnation." But she found herself accepting his existence, and his ageless survival, without a flicker of disbelief.

"Nor I," he said. "And yet, in all these eight barren centuries, no other woman has satisfied me, until you."

"You've really lived all that time? Then you can make me immortal." Now she knew; he was the unknown she had been seeking.

"No, my love, that's only an idle tale," he sighed. "Drinking from my veins would give you many things: the power to speak silently with me, mind to mind, the capacity to develop other mental powers not normally given to your kind, resistance to certain illnesses, and preservation of your beauty far into old age. But my longevity, my near-immunity to death, cannot be transmitted."

"Let me drink from you anyway," she said, sitting up and clutching his arms. "I want to belong to you completely."

He searched her face intently. "Are you certain?"

The life to which she would have returned dropped away like the scraps of a dream shredded by waking. "Yes, Reynard."

"Unless you are indeed my Isobel reborn, I do you a great disservice by taking you without time to consider. But I can't let you go." With his teeth, not visibly fang-like, she noticed, he slashed his own wrist and pressed it to her mouth. While she lapped the thin stream of blood, he held her, his eyes shut in rapture.

A vibration began to resonate in her ears, faint at first, gradually swelling. As its rhythm accelerated, she realized it was his heartbeat. Her own was pounding synchronously with it. Her lungs expanded and contracted in time with his; she sensed the heat of his passion and could not distinguish it from hers.

Abruptly, the red haze before her eyes cleared. He had pulled back from her. "Reynard, what —?"

"Hush." He stared abstractedly, listening. "I must leave you for a moment. Stay here."

He was gone. Isobel got out of bed, her skin prickling at the temperature change, and tugged on her still-damp clothes. She blinked in the darkness. Had the embrace just completed been a dream, after all? No, with a little effort, she could touch Reynard's mind. Though too inexperienced to read his thoughts without his cooperation, she sensed wariness, succeeded by cold anger.

A moment later she felt him returning, then heard his footsteps outside the door. He entered, carrying the kerosene lamp. "I've caught an intruder," he said. "Come with me."

He wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her down the stairs. At the bottom, on the weed-infested earth of the courtyard, lay an unconscious man, face down. Reynard set the lamp on the staircase and turned the man over. Ian.

"He came in search of you, it seems," said Reynard. "Since he was rudely insistent on exploring the tower, I was forced to act." Pinning Ian to the ground with one knee on his chest, Reynard spanned the young man's forehead with five spread fingers. Isobel felt the waves of psychic force emanating from him, though not directed at her. Ian stirred, muttering deep in his throat. "Wake," Reynard ordered.

Ian opened his eyes, stared around wildly for a moment, and focused on Isobel. "You're still here. Who is this lunatic? What's going on?"

Isobel's gaze slid over him like raindrops on a windowpane, and she turned to Reynard for guidance.

"If he was your friend, my love," said Reynard, "his fate must be yours to choose. What shall I do with him?"

Isobel perceived that Reynard was hinting at killing Ian to prevent his further interference. There was some reason why Ian shouldn't be killed, though she couldn't quite recall it Still, the scruple nagged at her mind persistently enough to make her reject that solution. "Can't you make him forget he ever saw us?" she said. "Make him believe the ruin was deserted when he came looking. Tell him to return to London and write me off as a total loss. He'll think I went back on my own and was too mad to bother contacting him.

"That is possible," said Reynard, if it is indeed your deepest will."

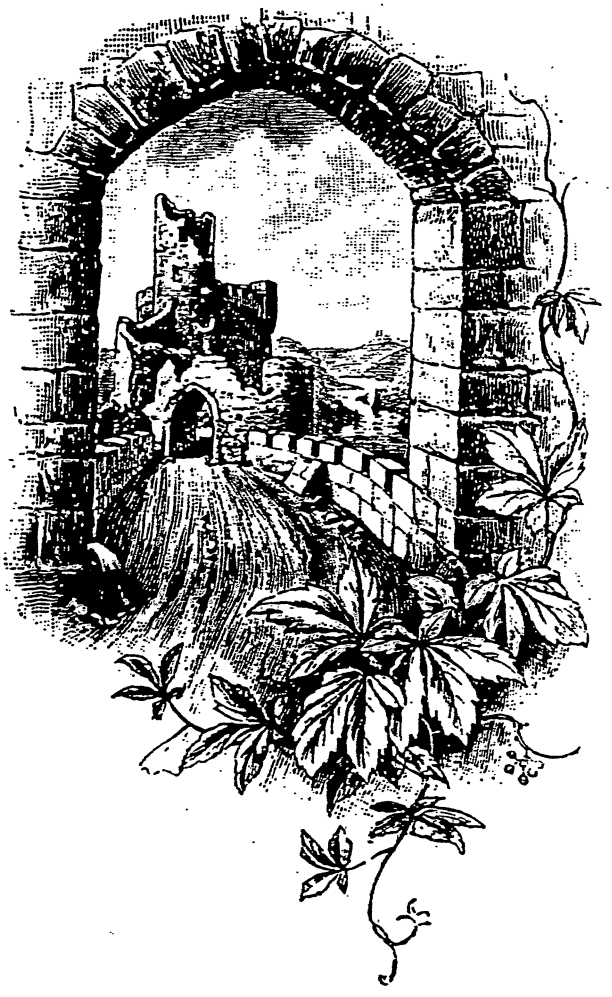
"Yes," she said.

Ian fumed, straining impotently against Reynard's force. "Isobel, what are you talking about? Have you lost your mind? What's he done to you?"

She recalled the Georgian tranquility of the University of Virginia campus, the dry-mouthed terror of her Ph.D. candidacy orals, hours of bibliographies and index cards in midnight libraries, punctuated by no more than a rare glow of discovery, the apathetic stares that had greeted her in the classes she'd taught as a graduate assistant, and the groping of Ian's importunate hands. She weighed these memories against the glamour of the tower room and Reynard's kiss. "Shown me my true self," she replied.

Holding Reynard's hand, she lent him her strength as he shrouded Ian's memory of her in the depths of night — the night that would henceforth be her home.

~ The End~



# To Stand Against the Wrath of Hell

By

Chris Kenworthy

[An "Angel" / "Buffy" tale
regarding the end
of the world]

# *Introduction to*

# *"To Stand Before the Wrath of Hell"*

## *The "Buffy-verse..."*

**Joss Whedon's supernatural vampire dramas,** *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* (the series)" both take place in more or less the same canon world, a realm where the doings of heroes and monsters lie beneath the facade of ordinary (well, as ordinary as any world gets) modern life. We were introduced to this world with the adventures of Buffy Summers, a vampire slayer — that is, a teenage girl with strength and physical skill far beyond the human norm, chosen by mysterious, unnamed powers to do battle with vampires and other supernatural threats to humanity.

Vampires in Whedon's world are generally strong, bloodthirsty, and without any scrap of human empathy. They are immortal except for certain traditional forms of death, but most vampires have no soul, being possessed by a demonic spirit, probably a fragment from the "Sire" vampire. To make a would-be victim into another vampire, the sire vampire must first force or convince a living human to drink at least a drop of the vampire's blood, and then drain nearly all of the victim's blood — he or she will die, and then rise again as an undead some time later.

Two particular vampires are important to mention for breaking this pattern, at least in part. Angelus, known as Liam in his life, was sired in the mid-1700s in Ireland, and quickly gained a reputation as one of the cruelest vampires in all of Europe. Around 1790, he was cursed by a gypsy tribe for having killed a favorite maiden, and had his soul restored so that he would feel remorse for his crimes. Unable to bear killing humans or living among other vampires, he became a pitiful wanderer, calling himself "Angel", and living on animal blood however he could find it. In the late 1990s, an emissary demon for the mysterious "Powers that Be" (a collection of mystic powers apparently native to another dimension and claiming to want the best for humanity) offered Angel a challenge to make something of his life and help Buffy in the difficulties that she would face in Sunnydale, California, the site of a mystic nexus to which all manner of terribly evil things were drawn, otherwise known as a "Hellmouth".

Buffy soon found out that her "man of mystery" was a vampire, but came to learn of his unusual circumstances, and gradually the two of them fell in love. After a couple tumultuous years together, Angel decided that he had to leave Buffy to live her own life, and moved to Los Angeles, where once again the elusive "Powers" offered him a challenge, to help the downtrodden helpless of the inner city, who had no other recourse against the fearsome demons that lived in the night. A number of other characters joined him in this odd crusade, several of whom I will mention later.

Spike, aka "William the Bloody" was one of Angelus' grandchilder, sired by Drusilla, a slightly deranged clairvoyant whom Angelus had considered his greatest achievement. Spike established himself as a master villain, a nemesis of Buffy and his grandsire, but after Angel left Sunnydale, Spike became a reluctant member of Buffy's social circle for a couple of unusual reasons, and eventually fell in love with her. He resolved to win a soul himself in order to be worthy of her, and did, but the shock and guilt (along with a phantom known as "The First Evil") drove him crazy for a while. Buffy helped him recover, but then, in the series finale of *Buffy*, Spike was killed in a great, epic battle against primitive vampires, burned alive by the channelled sunlight of a magical amulet even as he saved the day for them all.

# *"Angel the Series"*

### *To help the hopeless...*

In Los Angeles, Angel was approached by Doyle, a half-demon messenger from the mysterious Powers that Be (benevolent gods or protectors watching over humanity) with a challenging new mission. Along with Cordelia, one of the graduate's from Sunnydale High, they formed an odd detective agency — Angel as the front man and hero of the piece, Doyle guiding the way with visions from the powers, and Cordelia helping where she could and keeping the others in touch with humanity. The members of the team and their headquarters changed several times, but the mission stayed mostly the same...to stand up and defy evil, especially those who felt that they could avoid the consequences of their action, sheltered from the law by the evil lawyers of the Wolfram and Hart law firm.

### *Angel et. al Join Wolfram and Hart*

At the beginning of their final season, Angel and his surviving friends and compatriots were issued a strange offer by Wolfram and Hart and the mysterious and powerful demonic 'Senior Partners' who ran the firm from a faraway realm. They gave him the change to become senior officer of the Los Angeles branch, to do with its resources what he would and use them for good... if he was up to the challenge. Angel accepted the deal, and accepted a mysterious, purifying amulet as part of his fee — he gave it to Buffy, and Buffy gave it to Spike to wear in the great battle. Several days later, the amulet was mysteriously mailed back to the Wolfram and Hart offices, and Spike's ghost emerged from it. Many weeks later, after "haunting"the premises, Spike was suddenly brought back to life with a physical body again, and Angel was told that a prophecy he'd found years before about a champion with a soul, who would play a mysterious pivotal part in the apocalypse and become human afterwards, might apply to Spike instead of to Angel himself, as he had always assumed. The mysteries about Spike's return to Los Angeles were partly explained as the work of Eve, an enigmatic young woman who had been assigned as Angel's liaison contact with the Senior Partners, and Lindsay, a young lawyer who had been a rival of Angel years before.

### Fred and Illyria

Fred (Winifred) Burkle, a young physicist who was part of Angel's inner circle and had assumed charge of the branch office's science labs, was infected with the essence of a primordial demon, Illyria, and despite all her friends could do, the spirit of Illyria killed her and transformed her body into a powerful new vessel for the demon. However, Illyria's plans to conquer the earth again came to nothing when she found that the armies of her temples had long ago died, and she was lost without a place in the modern world. Wesley, Fred's new love of only a few weeks or days at the time she died, began to teach Illyria about the new world, though he was still consumed by grief.

### *Circle of the Black Thorn*

Angel began to act strangely and cultivate business relationships with the most despicable clients, employees, and other contact at Wolfram and Hart. His friends (and Spike) suspected that he was being corrupted by power, but in deepest secret Angel confessed his true plans to them...he was infiltrating the Circle of the Black Thorn, a secret society of agents that the Senior Partners were placing on earth to corrupt and consume it. Angel sacrificed much for the Circle, including killing a stalwartly good and honest Champion, Drogyn, to prove his loyalty, and signing a scroll that they told him would eliminate

any chance of regaining his humanity as the reward of prophecy, to demonstrate to them that he had forsaken hope. Nevertheless, despite the certainty that the Senior Partners would exact a furious vengeance for defying them, Angel and his friends planned to assassinate the members of the Circle, which they did, although Wesley was killed by dark warlock Cyrus Vail in the process.

### A Cliffhanger Ending to the Series

As *Angel the Series* drew to a close, the remaining members of the team (Angel, met up in a dark alley near one of their old haunts, and spotted demons and a dragon approaching them — the first vanguard of the Senior Partners' army. That is where my current story, "To Stand Against the Wrath of Hell," beings.

## *Other Characters*

**Virginia Bryce** - A wizard's daughter who met Wesley for the first time when Wesley was covering for Angel's absence by impersonating him... they dated for several months, but she left him because she was worrying too much about him getting hurt in such a dangerous line of work.

**Cordelia Chase** - A friend of Buffy's from Sunnydale, she took a job as Angel's office manager, then inherited Doyle's visions after he died. She became half-demon when the power of the visions was overloading her human body, and went into a coma after her body was used to give birth to an earthly vessel for a rogue Power. She returned briefly to warn Angel of the dangers around him at Wolfram and Hart, and to send him a secret vision of the Circle of the Black Thorn, then died.

**Dana** - A potential Slayer who had been abducted and assaulted as a young girl, then locked up in a mental institution after she was rescued. When her full Slayer powers came on her, (because Buffy and Willow made all potentials into Slayers,) she broke out of the institution. Angel wanted to rehabilitate her with Wolfram and Hart's resources, but she was taken by a representative of the Slayers and Watchers because she was one of their own.

**Allen Francis Doyle** - A half-demon messenger for the Powers That Be that told Angel about his mission in Los Angeles. He got visions of people in trouble, and sacrificed himself to save a large group of half-demons from a squad of demons trying to enforce racial purity.

**Faith** - A slayer who was unable to control her anger and bitterness, using her strength to evil ends. She came to Los Angeles to attack Angel and make him kill her, but he tried to rehabilitate her and Faith gave herself up to the police for a murder she had committed. She broke out of prison to help Wesley against a rock demon who had blotted out the sun.

**Rupert Giles** - Buffy's long-time Watcher and mentor.

**Groo (Grooselugg)** - A half-human, half-demon Champion from a faraway world, Pylea, he was supposed to be an arranged consort for Cordelia when she was declared sovereign of Pylea, and fell in love with her. When the evil demon priests ruling Pylea were overthrown and Cordelia left, he became ruler, only to leave later when a palace coup threatened his life. He found Cordelia and reunited with her, only to leave her because he thought that she was meant to be with Angel.

**Charles Gunn** - One of the friends that Angel met during his first year in Los Angeles, an inner-city young man who mobilized a team of fighters to oppose the vampires that were moving into their neighborhood.

**Kennedy** - Willow's girlfriend, another vampire Slayer.

**Lilah Morgan** - A Wolfram and Hart lawyer and Lindsey's ex-partner, she had an affair with Wesley and then was killed. She came back from the dead (Most Wolfram and Hart sign 'perpetuity contracts' that give the firm access to their services even beyond their lives) to tell Angel about the offer to run the LA branch.

**Wesley Wyndam-Pryce** - A trained Watcher (scholars who train and assist the Slayers,) who lost his position, became a rogue demon hunter and then a member of Angel's agency, then was fired or attacked by Angel several times. He was made head of the mystical research division at Los Angeles Wolfram and Hart

**Willow** - Buffy's long-time best friend from Sunnydale, now a powerful witch.

❖

***One final note...*** Well, I started writing this because I couldn't believe that the makers of "Angel" left us hanging on the edge of a metaphorical cliff, ending the series just as a huge battle was starting. Here is my notion of the way the story really ends: bravery, combat, sacrifice, reunions of lovers and of old friends, and more than a bit of "phlobotnam" (Joss Whedon's word for mysterious magical rituals that a writer makes up because there is a plot requirement.) I hope you all enjoy.

*Chris Kenworthy,*
Author of "To Stand Before the Wrath of Hell"
May 2005

# To Stand Against the Wrath of Hell

*by*

*Chris Kenworthy*

***[Editor's Note:** Did you ever wonder what happened next at the end of the* Angel *series, with all of our gang battling for their lives, with apparently their end and the end of us all at hand? This exciting tale from Chris Kenworthy takes a stab at the answer – and provides a thrilling tale that everyone can enjoy, including those who have never seen the series.]*

**So, there we were**, the final four, fighting the final battle against totally losing, totally impossible odds.

Gunn...my "home boy", my rock, my left hand man for...what, going on four years now? Charles Gunn, badly wounded in several places, moving towards death's door, yet standing up, that Carthaginian axe in his hand, because we needed every pair of arms that we could get.

Spike, the thorn in my side, the bane of my existence...and my unlikely partner in destiny. He was keeping his hands free for now, the way he always liked to do at the beginning of a big fight, but I knew that he had plenty of gear hidden underneath that coat of his...just waiting to see what was the right weapon to grab and the right time to put it to use.

Illyria, this strange, *bizarre* ancient demon who had taken over the body of one of my best friends, and who had tried to kill us all at least twice... But she (it?) had proven herself on the team over the past few weeks, and she grieved Wesley's death more keenly than any of us. She wanted to do some violence, and that was a point in her favor right now. We were gonna *need* some. She wasn't using any weapons at all – she never had, and didn't need any. She had forged Fred Burkle's body into a living arsenal.

And finally myself, of course, Angel. Liam. Whatever the hell you wanna call me. I hefted the broadsword in my right hand, testing its weight. Was I still a champion? I guess I was; that was what this whole thing had been about. Getting back to the good fight. But I didn't feel much like a champion now. Just a very scared vampire with a soul, getting ready to fight against overwhelming odds.

It took only an instant to consider what I knew about those enemies already arrayed against us. Wasn't sure if the dragon had heard what I said about wanting to kill it, but it didn't seem at all inclined to give me a chance just yet. Wyrms of that length are usually pretty intelligent, and it must have been instructed to fly high and wait...wait to run down and catch fugitives from the battle, or until a situation arose that called for decisive air support. For an instant, I was tempted to make a break for it and try to draw the dragon to me, but I resisted the impulse. There were enough other things to worry about for now.

Starting with the battalion of trolls. Gunn had been exaggerating, of course, when he'd talked about "the thirty thousand on the left." You simply couldn't fit that many beings of such size into one location...not when your locations are as limited in size as Los Angeles alleyways. As far as I could hear or see, there were about four hundred Tarralon demons on foot within two blocks of here, but I'll just call

them trolls because that's easier. Still not a particularly good start, considering that they outnumbered us a hundred to one and each were about as strong as Spike or myself, and right now even Illyria wasn't too far beyond us. Through the crowds of trolls marching towards us from three directions, I could see some sort of shadowy figures astride huge, four-legged creatures – couldn't make out if the riders were more trolls or some other kind of enemy, but I guess I'd find out soon enough if I lived that long. There were also scores of Gnastis demons...spidery things, about as large as Saint Bernard dogs, frighteningly quick to attack.

And that was about all I could figure out before the first wave of trolls was hitting us. "Let's do this!" I shouted as I slashed out fiercely with my blade and caught one by surprise, right through the neck arteries. But there were literally dozens more right behind him, and no room for strategy...just instinctive, primordial struggle. Spike took out a few with throwing knives, then appeared to reconsider and go back to bare-knuckles, while Illyria began to throw the trolls into each other as if they were bowling balls and pins. I remember elbowing one in the lower chest, then getting my legs swept out from under me and having to spend several long moments fighting off the arachnids...

* * *

The rider wasn't paying enough attention to me...he was entirely focused on Gunn, who was almost too weak to stand. This particular rider was, indeed, a troll – an officer among them, perhaps, and his steed was a beast that looked like it was a cross between a tiger and a giant snail...I'm not going to explain that one any further because trust me, the more detail I might tell you, the more disgusting it would sound.

My own reserves were starting to feel low at the moment, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Using my vampire strength and agility to the utmost, I leapt at the troll, knocking him clear off of his mount, grabbed the sidearm at his belt – a straight, pointed steel skewer about eleven inches long, and rammed it up his nose into his tiny brain.

Before the troll even stopped convulsing I was back up and lecturing Gunn. "If you don't take a breather, the next troll isn't gonna have to lay a hand on you," I growled above the din of the fight and STOMPED another Gnastis that had gotten bold and too careless, "You'll drop dead all by yourself."

"This is Ragnarok," Gunn protested. "The last battle: there ain't no time outs." But he suffered me to lead him over to a low trash cabinet that ran along the fence, and he sat down on it.

Suddenly, a ringing blow concussed the side of my head. Spiked mace, I thought, and sprang back up to my feet, only to realize that a razor-sharp longsword was cutting into the side of my neck. I focused on the face of the individual holding the sword...not a troll, but a slender, masculine figure who seemed to be cloaked in the deepest darkness. Wound up to take a strong punch at said face, only to realize that it was too late. Two trolls were grabbing my right arm, and gnastis locked onto my lower legs, weighing them down. I grabbed for the skewer with my left hand, but an arrow suddenly pierced it, pinning it to the wall.

This was clearly a co-ordinated attack on me. I glanced around quickly, but no one was in a position to help out. Gunn was trying to fight off the trolls and arachnids as best he could. Illyria, too, was busy with trolls, nearly a dozen of them, and she seemed to be tiring a little; there was no way she could fight free in time even if she realized what was happening to me. And Spike was battling with two other warriors of the deepest darkness, each of them mounted upon a midnight black horse.

Meanwhile, the blade was starting to slice deeper into my neck, and there was nothing at all I could do about it. Once it sliced apart the Jevson's conduit, that mystical channel in vampire physiology that connected the brain to the heart, I knew that I would feel no more pain. My body would instantly turn to dust. And there was no one else left to rescue me, not Lorne or Connor, who had hopefully gotten back out safely...not Wesley, who was dead, or Lindsay, whose death I had ordered. How many inches were left? Three... two... one...

I felt it happen more than saw it...the pain was so intense that tears were streaming out of my eyes at that point, I have to admit. A rush of heat and wind, a force that brushed the dark swordsman, and his

blade, away as casually as if they been autumn leaves. A loud bang. I blinked furiously, trying to regain sight,

Ten feet away from me, bits and pieces of the dark warrior lay scattered about the flaming bodies of at least four troll warriors and two arachnids. In that instant, I suddenly threw the restraining trolls over top of me and flung one of the arachnids away from my leg...and suffered through a siege of dizziness as my head, still almost half severed, wobbled to and fro a bit. I closed my eyes for a moment, which seemed to help.

"What the hell would you do without me?" There was an instant of pain in my left hand as the arrow was pulled from it, and the feel of hands pulling the other gnasti demons away from my legs and feet. I opened my eyes and saw Eve standing there, the beautiful and enigmatic former liaison to the senior partners of Wolfram & Hart. She still carried a small, open bottle in the crook of her elbow. It must have been a fireball vial, I realized, and it was the only thing that had saved my life. It...and the mysterious young woman who had loosed it.

"Don't ask me why the hell I did it," she groused, and headed over to help defend Gunn. She had taken the skewer, either from me or from the ground if it had fallen, and was using it with a good deal of *chutzpah* if no astounding skill. "I'd take better care of that noggin if I were you," she called back to me, stabbing out at a troll who evaded the attack easily.

"Do you have any other little tricks like that fireball up your sleeve, Eve?" I yelled back, picking up a fallen sword and looking for a good target.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Things were getting dire and desperate indeed, I could tell that much at first sight. The enemy were starting to take our measure, to hone attacks to the weak point of each member of my team, and there was still no lack of their numbers. In fact, a few new types of combatant seemed to be showing up, several of them apparently just waiting to make their move. A fifteen foot tall ogre. A small squad of walking skeletons, perhaps nineteen of them. Two creatures with the head, arms, and torso of a humanoid and the body of a fifty-foot-long snake... (now where had I seen something like *that* before?) And an entire cadre of seven blind men and women, each moving with complete and deadly precision – probably trained assassins.

Gunn really didn't seem to have much fight left in him, and if he didn't get medical help soon, the wounds he'd already suffered would probably kill him. Spike was almost as ragged around the edges as I was...I think one of the shadow warriors had used a mystical attack on him that worked much the same way as gunshots...which couldn't kill him, but he was fighting through system shock and nearly overwhelming pain. Illyria seemed battered and torn around the edges too...her blue armour showing visible cracks and dents in places, and a cut on her face streaming purplish blood. She was also favouring one leg.

I checked to make sure that my neck was starting to seal itself together again, then dived back into the fray once more, dispatching a few careless trolls, and attempting a frontal assault on the blind people, which turned out to be quite a mistake, since they drove me back against the wall, bleeding in a dozen places. I was starting to seriously wonder if they'd just slash my head off or pull out a sharp wooden spear and dispatch me that way when...

All of a sudden, a huge sheet of the fence behind me was torn away, almost casually, and a familiar figure stepped through, a tall, mostly human figure, muscular and handsome... "Groo!" I panted out. "What are *you* doing here?

"We have come to help!" Groo replied in that overly earnest, B-movie dialog that I always remembered him using. A half-human, half-demon Champion from another dimension, the Groosalug, (Groo for short,) had helped us out of a few scrapes before, but I never expected him to show up at a moment like this.

Suiting action to words, he swung his weapon, a long, one-sided blade with a rounded heavy head, and suddenly one of the assassins was missing his weapon, along with her arm halfway up to the elbow. That gave the rest of them pause, and while the cadre was focused on the new guy I got a good shot of my own in, opening up a wide gash to a blind man's collarbone.

"We?" I asked in astonishment, parrying off a furious counterattack, no, make that two counterattacks. A third tagged me, and I winced – Groo helpfully bashed the third attacker on the head with the blunt side of his weapon, creating a satisfying sound if no truly crippling damage. Blade of my sword was a cure for that.

When I got a chance to look back, a few other people were climbing through the makeshift passageway that Groo had opened.

"Aaron Seymour, who hears the words of the Powers," Groo managed to mention in introduction of the first one through when he wasn't busy hacking and bashing – the assassins had apparently withdrawn to tend to their wounds, but the snake demons, ogres, (when had more than one of them shown up?) and skeletons were eagerly taking their place.

Arron was a young man, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, obviously freaked out but still proud and determined. He stayed away from the fighting as best he could, though a thick short staff or club of some sort was hanging from his belt, and rushed over to check on Gunn – probably for the best, on both counts.

Right behind Aaron was a woman in her later thirties, attractive and self-possessed, with light brown hair. She pulled out a plain rapier to guard Groo's flank, and then did a double-take when she realized that a skeleton warrior was stepping up to challenge her. There was obviously no way to hurt the thing by stabbing it or whacking it with the light, edgeless blade. I tossed the heavy, curved sword I had been using over to her, and picked up an abandoned pole arm, the better to fend off ogres and snakemen.

"And Natasha Devon, Watcher's Council," Groo continued after pounding three skeletons into splinters.

That got my attention. "New council?"

"Old council, on detached duty for the new," Natasha said, wheezing slightly with the effort of wielding the heavy weapon, but acquitting herself pretty well. "You must leave this place, all of you, or you will perish!"

I had to admit that she had a point, but... "If we run, they'll chase us down – if the legion isn't on the other side of this fence, they're on their way." I grunted to myself, trying to thrust the point of this weapon through an ogre's head lance-style, but it just bounced off a thick layer of bone. "Then there's the dragon, and..." Suddenly I started objecting and began to plan. "Huddle up!" I called to the gang, and quickly they gathered round, Spike, Illyria, Groo and I facing outwards to drive off the enemies that tried to interrupt the war council.

"Gunn, Eve, you go with Groo and his friends. Get them to safety," I began.

"Our only safe refuge..." Aaron interrupted. "We... We can access it but once. Everyone has to come together, at the same time."

I groaned in frustration. "Okay. Protect them nearby. Where do we have to be?"

Natasha whispered from across the street. "Spike, Illyria: keep up the fight here. Did you need to use that little surprise at the Fell Brethren headquarters?"

Spike realized that I was talking to him and stopped still in surprise. The Fell Brethren had been his assigned target when we destroyed the demons of the Circle, but he seemed to take a moment to realize what I meant by "the little surprise." Groo had to block a troll punch from connecting with his head. "Uhh... no, I didn't. It's still right here." He patted the side of his torso underneath the leather coat, and I could just make out a slightly bulgy object there.

"Good. Set 'it' up here, then. Draw as many of W-R-H's people into the area as you can..." Now when did we start calling WolfRam & Hart that? "...and then both of you splitsky and Spike sets it off. Meet up with Groo and Natasha as soon as you can."

"What about you?" Eve asked.

"He's gonna draw Smokey-wing's fire," Spike guessed, pointing at the dragon, who was glaring balefully down at us from a building ledge.

* * *

I jumped up onto an old Chevy someone had abandoned in our alley, crossed it from back to front in two steps, and somersaulted off of it, aiming for a spot thirty-five feet away that seemed to be temporarily free of troll. Behind me, I knew, Spike and Illyria were strutting their combative stuff with new hope, and the rest were getting ready to run as soon as the dragon started to chase after me. I figured that I had to get to the far end of the alley before that would happen.

Groo and his friends had supplied me with some new weapons quickly – a brand new mace that looked to be good for troll whacking, and a truesilver cutlass that I was saving for the wyrm itself. Speaking of which... WHACK. SMACK! **WHAAAACK**!!! Troll squiths.

And then two of the blind assassins stepped out of the shadows to either side, right in front of me, eager for a quick rematch. DAMMIT, I did *not* have time for this!! And suddenly... Thwickk! Thwickk!! Each of them was staggered, with a crossbow bolt in mid-thigh.

I turned around long enough to see Gunn standing just on the other side of the Chevy, holding a triple-action crossbow with one bolt still cocked. I spared half a wave for him and took off. The dragon let out a huge roar and flew down towards me. The remaining trolls and arachnids anywhere near me, and even the wounded assassins, moved in the opposite direction. Nobody else wanted to get in the way of this hell-lizard once it got started, huh?

I didn't know that much about fighting dragons, but I thought I knew this much: never give them a chance to use their momentum against you, and don't give them time to plan their strike if you can help it. I rolled to the side as it flew in for a landing, set the mace aside, drew the sword, (glowing with a brilliant blue light now,) and slashed out at a wing. The flying beast honked in pain and shock, and slashed at me with a claw. The fight was joined.

As I struggled with the dragon, amazingly enough, part of my mind started going over what I'd accomplished so far. Definitely people had been hurt, and fine people had lost their lives, and I'd have to answer for that. But there's been a lot of good done. I honestly don't believe that Wolfram and Hart had as many good operatives in the rest of the world as they had right here in Los Angeles, within the Circle of the Black Thorn. This city had been a fortification for them, safe ground within which they could take sanctuary and from which they launched missions elsewhere on planet Earth. They'll try to regroup and rebuild, but that isn't the sort of thing that can be done quickly, and they'll have to divert resources from other places and other worlds, which is good news for those other worlds. And they're diverting even more resources, and pretty hastily, to summon this army here to beat the crap out of us; which is hopefully even better, (despite the fact that more innocents might be killed by the horde, especially if we manage to escape them.)

Besides... even if it doesn't matter, if the resources of the Senior Partners are effectively infinite, at some point it's the only thing left to do to call them out and take the wrath. It's better than sitting in a hole, terrified to do any good for the sake of calling hell down upon yourself. I've called the Senior Partners' hand now. Only time will tell whether it's a bluff or not, or somewhere in between.

The fight between myself and the dragon had wandered down the city block by now, and I had to face the fact that I wasn't gonna kill him here and now. Though my neck had healed a bit, my hand was still hurting like hell, fresh blood dripping from a new gash near my shoulder, about a dozen other flesh wounds, and I was up against an enemy that outnumbered and outweaponed me ten to one. Still, as much as I'd have liked to, killing him right then was not the real plan.

Have to choose the moment carefully, I thought to myself, and slashed at the beast's snout, scoring a hit substantial enough to drive it back for a few seconds... I stood in front of it, grabbed a small amulet in my pocket, and muttered "invoke."

Then I turned around and ran like hell.

The amulet? It had been another little glamour charm I stole from the Wolfram and Hart office...at the same time as I took the other, more sophisticated one, that I used to convey the plan to the guys, right there in my office, without anyone noticing. The second one was a simpler model, but for a minute or two the dragon would see and smell me, standing right there in front of it, surrounded by an

aura of power. I hoped the wyrm would take pretty much that long or longer to realize that I hadn't been rendered unattackable, I just wasn't there.

As I rushed past the alley, giving it a wide berth, there was a huge explosion. Good. Spike carried off his part in the plan. I was confident that he and Illyria had gotten out of the blast zone okay.

* * *

By the time I got to the area that Natasha had mentioned and found them, Spike and Illyria had beaten me there. However many minions of hell had been taken care of in the explosion, there were still plenty of them about at the moment, but no alarm had been sounded to the hiding place that Groo had selected. (Which presumably meant that anyone who discovered it had been taken care of.) I had to avoid and fight my way through quite a few troll parties on the way, though... They were obviously on a search pattern for us. That took some more energy and left me with a few more superficial cuts and scrapes... getting to a safe haven would be not a moment too soon.

"How are we doing?" I asked breathlessly, and saw Gunn, who was lying very still, his head in Eve's lap. "Is he..."

"He's still alive, and stable, but he's lost a lot of blood," Eve reported simply. "Hopefully once we get to the haven they'll be able to help him."

"All right." I turned to Groo and Natasha. "Where's the safe house?"

"A long way across town, physically," Natasha began, "but we're not going in the front door because then the enemy would probably track us. There is a medium-range transportation portal..." she pointed, "right over there." I could make out the black wooden shape, a small doorway, on the outer wall of the building across the street. "I have the key word that will activate the doorway for twenty seconds, and then disable it completely. No one will be able to reconnect it with the safe haven unless they know precisely which magical formula to inscribe upon it."

"And how do we know that Wolfram and Hart's bright boys won't be able to figure out the formula?" Spike asked.

"They'd need to know the precise location of the safe haven first," Aaron put in. "Along with the runes that are inscribed upon the master gateway within." I'd forgotten about Aaron, but he'd been helping Gunn and Eve as they fled the alley, for which I was grateful.

"All right," I decided. "Better sooner than later." I looked around – the street seemed reasonably free of trolls. "Twenty seconds – that's more than two seconds for each of us, but still not a hell of a lot of time. If a troll or two manage to follow us in, we can take care of that there."

"Wait a second," Spike piped up. "Why exactly does liaison-girl get a free pass into the secret club hideout? Maybe this is the plan, for her to betray us to the big boys, maybe earn back her immortality contract!"

"Hey!" Eve put in. "I saved Angel's life back there, and I get payback in outrageous accusations?"

"Yes," I told her softly. "Okay, Spike, your objection is fair...and I say we put it to a quick vote, original targets only. Gunn can't vote at the moment, so that's you, me, and Illyria. Best two out of three win." I wasn't sure how this would go, but I went ahead with it. "My vote is to trust her...I really believe that she wants to change. To redeem herself."

"You would," Spike mumbled under his breath.

"I 'vote' that she can rot out here," Illyria declared. "She stinks of the wolf, the ram, and the hart. They are her blood, her essence. We can *not* trust her!!"

Eve turned imploringly to Spike. "Please... I won't betray you to the Senior Partners in any way. If they find me out here they'll know that I helped you..."

Spike's face twisted in indecision. "I want to trust you, doll. But the stakes are too high..."

"Wait a second," Aaron interrupted. "How about, as a compromise, we take her with us and don't let her out or communicate outside? That way, she'll be safe and she won't have an opportunity to betray you."

Spike, Illyria, and I exchanged a glance. "Why didn't we think of that?" Spike muttered. "All in favor?"

Illyria carried Gunn's unconscious form as we rushed across the street, Spike kept a close eye on Eve, and I watched young Aaron to make sure that he'd be okay. Just as we were getting close to the doorway, though, a darkness warrior riding on a terrible horse appeared out of nowhere, literally. One instant there was nothing there, and then he standing right in front of me. Spike and I shared a long look. Certainly letting this joker slip into the safe haven would be a serious problem, if not disaster.

I pushed Aaron ahead of me towards Groo. "I'll take care of him," I called to Spike and Illyria. "You get our friends inside safely."

"I should be the one to stay." It was Illyria. "I am stronger and have a much more precise evaluation of time. You are quite capable of taking Charles Gunn and carrying him through the door."

Youch. As...well, as emasculating as that was, I really couldn't argue with her. The wounds that I'd seen Illyria take earlier, she seemed to have shaken off already. Her blue armour was smooth and unbroken, her movements lithe and agile. (And I thought *I* was a quick healer!!) Gunn was quickly transferred between us – Natasha had already spelled the portal open and people were starting to file in. I looked back – the shadow rider was trying to charge past Illyria, but she stood into his way and knocked the horse down with a single punch. And then I dived through the portal.

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen..." Spike was counting out. "...seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twent..." Illyria's body slipped through the white gateway just before it blinked back to dull gray – there was no time for anyone to follow her through. Actually, something tried – there was bit of a horse hoof sitting near the bottom of a gateway.

"I'll dispose of this ritually..." Natasha said, picking the chunk of nail up. "Otherwise it might be able to mutate into a demonic form capable or leaving the haven and reporting on its location."

Somewhat belatedly I started to look around. The place was some kind of an underground bunker. "By the way...who's in charge here?" I asked. There were a few other people (and demon species that I recognized as generally harmless) waiting around and looking at the new arrivals.

"Angel?" A beautiful woman with curly red hair pushed through the crowd and hurried up to me. "Where's Wesley?"

Not a question I wanted to answer right now... and where did I know this woman from? Where did she know Wesley from?

"Virginia?" Gunn asked weakly... I guess he had woken up at some point. "Virginia Bryce... are you in charge of the haven?"

"Yes," she said shortly. "I was told that Wesley would be expected with you, is he – " She put a hand to her mouth, shocked. "Did he... Did something happen to him?"

I still hated this, but maybe it was better to say it out loud. Virginia had been an old girlfriend of Wesley's, several years ago – a wizard's daughter he had met when he was trying to protect her from assassins. "I'm sorry. He didn't make it out alive, Miss Bryce."

She gasped loudly, unable to form words for a moment, holding back tears.

# II

**Virginia aimed the glowing green gemstone** on her bracelet so that its peculiar radiance swept Gunn from head to toe, turned the beam off somehow, and stared into the facet for a moment. "His wounds are all stitched up," she recapped. "The blood transfusion from Miss Kates is going smoothly, a perfect match, and once that's done we can set him up on a glucose IV. I don't see any other problems requiring medical attention." She looked up and smiled at me, Illyria, Spike, and Groo. "Charles should be noticeably improved in an hour or two, though as his 'doctor' I'm formally excusing him from fighting any more battles to the death for at *least* three days."

"He might not take to that well, Miss, considering we're in the middle of a war here," Spike put in. He had been partially patched up already himself...the bullet-like wounds bandaged and bound with mint leaves and essence of icefruit, which have restorative effects on vampires. I'd been dressed up with some of the stuff myself.

"I'm sure that you can help me to persuade him," Virginia insisted. "He's done enough, and very nearly got himself killed."

"Well, we have a chance to rest and plan our next move, at least," I said. We had walked out into some kind of an informal conference room, conveniently enough. I turned to Groo first. "Groosalug, what the heck are you doing here? I thought you were going back to Pylea."

"I had thought of returning," Groo admitted, "but I had no place there, and knew not any way to go back. This land of yours seemed so vast and fascinating, that I began to explore it, seeking to help those in distress as I went."

"I met Groo in southern Idaho," Natasha put in. "Was trying to find a way to escort my 'potential' charge, Shannon, to Sunnydale California and Buffy Summers' protection. Harbingers and vampires were close on our trail, but..." she looked up at the tall warrior and smiled warmly at him. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Groo and Natasha were more than colleagues, or friends or whatever. "He protected us all the way through to the very edge of town, and fought down thirty Bringers to give her a chance to make a break for it."

This threw me for a moment, considering that so much had happened that day. Spike broke in. "Wait a second... Shannon? Yeah, she got there." Things started to fall into place then, a number of details that I had heard only secondhand. While I had been busy with a couple of things down here in L.A. last year, Buffy and her friends in Sunnydale had been protecting more and more "potential slayers" – teenage girls from all over the world who had what it would take to possibly be called as a vampire Slayer.

An army of dark priest demons had been trying to eliminate the Slayers entirely... and had managed to eliminate almost all of the scholarly Watchers pledged to protect and train the Slayers and potentials. But Buffy's best friend Willow had used magic to turn all of the potentials, all across the world and forever, into Slayers – to give them access to their conceivable strength immediately, instead of waiting to get it one at a time when a previous Slayer died, and with Spike's help, they had destroyed the dark priests and foiled their dastardly plan.

"So, when Rupert Giles started up the council again, he put you on detached duty? Why didn't he give you a slayer or three to train? I know that they're short on personnel right now."

"I didn't want one yet," she admitted. "I respect the hell out of Rupert Giles and wish him the best, but this new council he's building is turning against a lot of old tradition. I wanted to take a break for a few years and see what policy was by then. Also, by that time I'd found Aaron, and Groo and I kinda have our hands full with him."

I moved along. "And you're a direct link to the powers that be, except they communicate with words, instead of visions, right?" I asked Aaron.

"Yeah. Normally frustrating, cryptic words in rhyming couplets, but Nat can usually figure out what they're trying to tell me."

"And they told you that we were in trouble?" I asked. Nod. "How long ago?"

"Ohh...the first one came in sometime this morning," he said after a moment. "Took us all day to figure out who you were, where you were, and where you'd be by the time you needed our help."

"What, the message was about him, specifically?" Spike put in on cue, jerking a thumb in my direction. "Figures. Once again, Brood Boy catches a huge break from the Powers."

I was about to shout at him to cut it out, when, shockingly, Illyria cut in and saved me the trouble. "Enough!" the demon declared, staring at Spike with so much intensity that I could feel all the millions of her years in the weight of her regard; Spike actually squirmed underneath that powerful gaze. "They saved us *all*. *THAT* is what is important." And then she turned away from him.

I broke in, eager to change the subject. "And just how did you know to make contact with Virginia? Is she officially associated with the watchers or something?"

Virginia laughed slightly under her breath, and Natasha shook her head. "No, but when you're working as a roving watcher, you get to know people who know people. I was trying to find some safe base or refuge for you guys, and called a vampire hunter I knew who worked the Wilshire area, and he put me in touch with a contact here in Virginia's school. It wasn't until I was telling her the details that I realized she knew any of you."

"Well, thanks," I said, nodding my head to Virginia. "We'd have probably been dead by now if it weren't for all your help. That goes for you guys too, Natasha, Groo, Aaron."

"Don't thank us yet," Natasha decided. "Wolfram and Hart's Senior Partners aren't about to give up looking for you this easily, and they're probably still massing their horde of demons here in L.A. By the way, I've made a call for help to the council, but I haven't gotten back any answer. Not quite sure whether to expect one – word is that there are quite a few people who were upset about your deal with Wolfram and Hart, Mister Angel."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I said, remembering Andrew Wells' closing words at the end of the incident with the wild Slayer, Dana. Buffy had ordered Andrew to make sure that Dana didn't stay in my custody, and had dispatched a full dozen slayers to him as backup. Even considering our little unspoken pact about staying out of each other's affairs except in cases of dire need, that had been a clear signal that she didn't trust me any more.

"And we didn't realize at the time I made the call that things were anywhere near this serious," Natasha added. "I could try again...do you have a live phone in here, Miss Bryce?"

"No," Virginia said. "No way to keep them from opening a hole in the scrying blanket. We can try putting you out through a portal, though I'd rather not do too much of that considering everyone who's after you."

"For now, I'd suggest dropping it," I muttered. If the slayers want to come and help, they'll come. If not, we'll find some way of dealing with this ourselves." My teeth ground against each other a few seconds before I noticed it. Tore me up that things had come to this between Buffy and I, but if there was one thing that I'd realized lately, it was that she wasn't always going to come charging to my rescue. Once, long ago, maybe, but I couldn't let myself keep thinking of that.

"I hope so," Virginia muttered doubtfully.

I smiled my most confident smile and turned back to her. "Do you have any good information on the situation outside?"

"Not me personally, but just a second." She hit a small intercom button, and talked softly to someone...I couldn't make out the words. In just a few seconds someone new came in to meet with us — a Vegrar demon, chalky-gray skinned and square eared. "This is Mattasee, my star pupil."

"You run a magic school here, Miss!" Spike exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes," Virginia agreed. "Pure white wizardry only, for no personal objectives. The sanctuary is really only an offshoot."

"Mattasee?" I asked the young demon – at least he didn't look very old by human standards. "What can you tell us about the state of Wolfram and Hart's campaign against us?"

"Well, I can't accurately guess what types of creatures they've sent through the dimensional gateway," he said in a somewhat high and squeaky voice, "but there was a big rush of activity around 2:15 to 2:20 am, which then eased off, and regular activity from then for another twenty-five minutes. Since then, there's been no activity at all, but they are maintaining the aperture at maximum dilation, which would seem to indicate they anticipate the need for future transfers."

"2:45 AM was about when they stopped?" Illyria asked to confirm. I wondered exactly when she had become so familiar with our time system...possibly after the time jumping stuff. "That was a few minutes after the explosives were detonated... significantly before we passed through the doorway to this habitat."

"Ever since you came in, we've been getting reports of a change of tactics from the horde," Mattasee continued. "No longer content with scouring the streets for you, they're storming through buildings, sewer systems – anywhere that might conceivably provide cover – for a hiding place like this one. They're starting around the spot where you took the doorway in and expanding erratically, so it's impossible to guess when they might reach here...but I wouldn't imagine we have much longer than 24 hours."

"Wait a second," I said, suddenly realizing a question I should have asked earlier. "This giant dimensional gateway that they used to bring the horde across...where is it?"

"Umm..." He stretched his hands apart, revealing an odd pattern of lights hanging in the air between, and peered at the lights intently. "Looks like...Hyperion Hotel."

*"What???"*

"Old place, lay abandoned for years, until some nutcase vigilante started using it as a base a few years back," Mattasee continued blithely, obviously not realizing what kind of nutcase he was talking to. "Ground level, fairly central... I'd say the lobby floor."

"They were coming through right next door," I muttered, realizing it. "That was how they got there so quickly, and kept bringing in new kinds of troops." Something was starting to fall into place, but not completely. "I need to talk to Gunn about this, once he wakes up. Virginia, Mattasee...uh, Illyria too, I'd like you all there."

"I don't get to sit in?" Spike complained.

"You weren't there when we were at the Hyperion, Spike," I pointed out, and noticed that Mattasee was starting to clue in. "I don't expect you to have much to contribute, but you can watch if you like."

Someone called Virginia away at that point, and Mattasee went with her. "What's the deal with this Bryce lady?" Spike asked me in a low voice. "You know her, Charles knows her."

"This shell...I do not retain any memories of her from Fred," Illyria put in.

"It was before Fred met us," I told her. "She... well, the way it started was pretty complicated, actually. Her wizard father wanted to hire me on as her bodyguard. I was out of town on personal business, and the envoy the father had sent wouldn't take no for an answer, so Wesley pretended to be me and took on the job in my place." I smiled slightly at the thought.

"No need to go into all the details, but she had a falling out with her father and ended up dating Wesley for several months before breaking it off. I had no idea that she was involved in this magic school/sanctuary stuff."

Spike nodded, and Illyria stepped away from us, towards Virginia, who had come back into the room. "Are you acquainted with a warlock named Cyvus Vail?"

Virginia's face took on a look of surprise first, and then disgust. "Unfortunately, yes. Pretty much the bottom of the barrel, but he's quite influential. The people my father refused to do business with sometimes did business with him."

"Wesley's mission, tonight, was to eliminate Vail," Illyria said. "Unfortunately, he did not succeed in this task... we all underestimated the resources that the warlock had at his disposal. It was Vail

who killed Wesley." A pause. "However, through Wesley's sacrifice, I was able to complete his mission. Vail is destroyed... I felt that you should have this information."

"Um, uh, th-thanks," Virginia stuttered. "I... I need to go, go do something else." She hurried back out again.

* * *

"The... The Hyperion lobby?" Gunn said. He did look a little stronger now, though the IV drip going into his arm made me feel weird. "I... Didn't we do some bad-ass magic ritual there? I... I can't remember exactly what for..."

"I was worried about that," I told him. "You're under an enchantment, an enchantment that I negotiated as part of the deal with Wolfram and Hart. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but..."

"I am no longer completely under this enchantment," Illyria announced. "Well, I never was, truly, but I have recovered the memories of Winifred Burkle that were affected by the dweomer."

"Really?" I thought a moment. "Of course – you were there when the Orlon window was broken. I should have asked you about this outside, but I keep...forgetting that you have access to Fred's memories."

"What's a dwee..." Spike started, and I cut him off with a gesture.

"It's a fancy word for a magic spell, obviously. Learn to read from context. Ummm... Illyria, were you going somewhere with that thought?"

She nodded. "First, you cast a spell in the hotel lobby to travel to inter-dimensional space and consult with the Mesek-tet totum of Wolfram and Hart, while you were trying to rescue Connor from the quor'toth."

"Connor?" Gunn repeated. "That kid who Cyvus Vail was after to kill a demon for him?"

"You weren't even there then," I reminded him. "You were in the holding cell dimension when Cyvus went after Connor!"

"Hey, I caught up on office gossip after I got back," Gunn shot back. "How did we even know Connor back then?"

"He was Angel's son," Illyria explained, "a human baby born to Darla the vampire — quite extraordinary and beyond the point. Later, a rift opened in the hotel lobby, through which Connor emerged, aged to sixteen earth years within the space of a few weeks, relative to this world's time flow," Illyria continued. "Cordelia Chase, serving as the host for the essence of the rogue Power that became known as Jasmine, was first seen in that lobby after Chase was taken to a higher plane of existence. And..." she frowned here. "When you returned from the dimension of the spider demons, bearing Jasmine's true name, did the portal you arrived in by any chance open in the Hyperion lobby?"

I nodded ruefully. "Yeah, it did. Gunn, we'll go over the Connor stuff later, okay?"

"Umm, yeah, sure," Gunn said, shaking his head in near disbelief. *"Two vampires having a kid?"*

"Then it seems clear that your own activities have built the Hyperion lobby into a dimensional hotspot location," Illyria declared. "Dark interdimensional rituals and incoming portals tend to have that effect - they charge the psychic 'batteries' available at a given location."

"Wait a second," Gunn broke in. "That contract you signed with Wolfram and Hart... Did you read the fine print?"

"Ummm..." I hesitated. "I tried to, but there was really a lot of it..."

"Do you remember if there was anything about the hotel in it?"

Somehow that rang a bell. "I'm not sure... I kinda think so – but I have no idea what it was. I'm sorry."

"That's okay," he assured me. "But you might have signed some kind of rights over the Hyperion hotspot over to them."

"This is all very interesting," Spike broke in. "But what does it mean for right now?"

I looked around at the others. "Not sure," Gunn admitted.

* * *

"I don't see that there's anything else useful to discuss in here at the moment," I said a little bit later, in the conference room. "We need to head out again, try to tackle the horde – at least to distract them or divert them. Only those strong enough to protect themselves well... So, that'd be me, Illyria, Spike, Groo..." I looked at Natasha, not wanting to discount her out of hand. "I'll take your word on whether you qualify."

"What about me?" Aaron piped up.

"I'll take Natasha and Groo's word, when it comes to you," I told him with a slight chuckle.

"You'd better stay in here, Aaron," Natasha told him with a slight sigh. "Wait for another message. And I'll be here with you."

"All right," Virginia said. "Any idea where you'd like to come out?"

"Somewhere in the city just beyond the army's point of progress," I said, "but in a different way than towards the haven. They're going to assume that we're trying to slow them down and will probably divert creature-power in whatever bearing we appear from."

"All right," Virginia said, and started checking the map.

"Remember, Angel," Natasha put in. "There's only an hour or two left to sunrise. Most of the creatures in that army will be able to operate all right during daylight, but *you* can't."

"I know the drill," I said in a low voice.

"Okay, I've got an exit spot for you," Virginia said, hurrying back. "Under the circumstances, I can't allow you to use the same doorway to go out and come back in – too much chance the enemy would discover it and figure out the right word to use to get in here."

"Why... Why are you doing this, Virginia?" I said after a few moments. "Giving us haven is putting your entire operation here at risk – you have to know that."

She shrugged a little. "Because it's worth doing."

The four of us armed ourselves up (except for Illyria, who still didn't believe in using foreign objects), and Groo and I accepted some magical items that could be very useful, even if none of the artifacts that Virginia and Mattasee could spare were particularly powerful. (Spike was still on his "no amulets" kick, which maybe isn't too surprising considering how the last one worked out.) Virginia gave us instructions for finding, activating, and using a few magic doorways that could return us to the haven – she'd shut down pretty much the entire system after we'd come through, knowing the chances were good that Wolfram and Hart's goons could have spotted a portal and reported it to a warlock, who could set about trying to divine the key term that would activate it.

"Oh, by the way," Mattasee mentioned just as we were about to cross over. "There's activity on the gateway again. Just thought I should let you know about that." It wasn't good news, but I didn't really see how it changed our plan. Tried not to let Spike see I was getting nervous.

We emerged into a deserted apartment building courtyard, and followed the sounds of rampage and destruction. Didn't take too long to find about three dozen trolls, along with a couple of Xakanar demons and two of the shadow warriors. The trolls and demons were bashing holes into a couple of houses and other buildings, and also just digging down beneath the street at a point that seemed to be completely random. Down the block I could see that there were houses that had been reduced to rubble, and wondered if there had been people – families – still inside them at the time.

We attacked, instantly, and seemed to be doing pretty well. I was fencing with one of the shadow warriors, doing pretty well, and Illyria managed to take out the other one with a good sucker punch. Spike began to tangle with the Xakanar, while Groo did mop-up duty with the trolls and Illyria joined him as soon as she was done. Even when another Wolfram and Hart group joined in, including some ogres and a baboon demon, we seemed to be holding our own, and I was sure that we wouldn't need to worry about escaping and running away until a *lot* more reinforcements showed up.

Suddenly, the bad guys turned and ran off in the direction opposite from the one we had come from. "Do we chase them?" Spike called out.

"We've got momentum, why ruin it?" I called out, feeling the rush of battle still surging in my veins.

"Umm... Excuse me, sweetie?" a new voice called out. I spun around and recognized her instantly. "I called off the troops – thought it would be easier to have a nice, quiet chat if you weren't fighting for your life."

"We were all getting by pretty well," I felt obliged to insist. "Lilah Morgan. What are *you* doing here?"

"Out on assignment again," the dead Wolfram and Hart lawyer reported glibly. "I'm in charge of this mission." She waved around, clearly indicating all of the evil creatures going about their business not far away.

"Looks like you haven't done too well on your assignment so far," Spike put in.

"I haven't killed any of you yet, I admit," she conceded, "but I have patience. You haven't inflicted many casualties on my troops – I hope you understand that. And we're quite prepared to search the entire city – levelling most of it along the way if we have to – to find the secret hideout where you disappeared to, and where you're keeping Charles. Soon enough, you'll have nowhere left to run to, and the final battle can begin again." She shrugged. "Of course, there is another option that I've come up with."

"What, we just hand ourselves over to spare the city?" I scoffed.

"No, I didn't think you'd go for that one," she said offhandedly. "But... Well, first off, this is a revenge mission, and there's precious little profit in revenge. Especially with the kind of overhead we're taking on. All that the Senior Partners *really* require at this point is a face-saver, something that they can show to their friends and say 'yeah, we spared the fools' lives, but in exchange we got *this*.' I've spent all night researching what you have to offer, and would be *able* to offer without violating your ethics, that would satisfy them."

Was getting a bad feeling here... I didn't know anything that I could give up that would be important enough to be worth all of our lives, and I wasn't sure I wanted to give it to Lilah if I had something like that... But I had to admit I didn't see that we had the forces available to stop her plan either. "What is it?"

"The Tooth of Light."

Lilah couldn't have surprised me more if she had said she wanted to catch the Easter Bunny. "That... That doesn't exist! It was just a plot point in a fantasy sequence... How do you even *know* about it, anyway?"

Lilah smiled her big wide smile. "Oh, *that* is the interesting part! The Tooth is definitely real – it has nothing to do with the Beast, and couldn't have been used very well against him. But it's a real weapon, and you can show us the way to it, using your fantasy sequence as a guide. Somehow, Wo Pang's ritual dialed you into the true hiding place of the Tooth, and the defenses that guard it. Why and how, we don't know."

"So, Angel fetches this weapon, and hands it over to you..."

"Probably to one of the knights of the Order of Soron, or someone else I specify," Lilah corrected.

"...and then what happens?" Spike prompted.

"We let you live, we pull out of Los Angeles for the time being," Lilah told him. "My mission will be over. The Senior Partners will probably be starting to insert new agents back into the region, but that's out of my hands. I think I can promise that they won't target you again until the next time you interfere with their plans."

"You cannot offer her what she wants, Angel," Illyria opined. "The only reason she would make such an offer is if the weapon she speaks of is more valuable to the Wolf, the Ram, and the Hart than our deaths."

"Correction," Lilah said. "The tooth is more valuable than your deaths, minus the expense of actually getting you killed. But if you don't want to negotiate, that's fine. I'll come find you before I take the offer off the tabl... What the hell?"

I turned around cautiously, and saw a wimpy little guy in a suit walking up to us. "Miss Morgan, there's a new development," he said without introduction. "New players have shown up at the ruins of the branch office. Could be bad news for us if..."

"You idiot!" she screamed at him. "Couldn't you tell I was negotiating with the enemy?!" She pointed at milquetoast boy, and he disappeared in a cloud of shimmering air. And then, like a blink, Lilah was gone too.

"We need to get back to the office," Spike pointed out. "As quickly as possible."

"We can't afford to go through the haven and back out," I decided.

"Was there anything that Virginia and her boy gave you that allows for quick travel?" Spike asked. "The law offices, or what's left of them, are on the other side of the horde's territory."

I checked through my pocket. "Nope, no luck." I wasn't even sure if Illyria had taken anything, but she didn't examine any items physically. (Probably if she had, she'd remember exactly what she had and so wouldn't need to consult them again.)

"Oh, I have something!" Groo said. Taking out a small figurine, he held it up in front of his face. "I summ–"

"Wait a sec..." I began, but too late, of course.

"–mon you!" Groo finished. With a soft BAMMPH and a pop of light, a gigantic white bird was sitting there on the ground, between us. The figurine blew away as dust in the wind.

"A bird?" Illyria asked caustically.

"Why not?" I asked. "As long as it'll get us there, and quickly, I'd ride a giant wasp." I turned to Groo. "Do you know how to instruct it?"

"I think, since I am the one who commanded it forth, that all I need to is instruct it mentally," he replied.

"Well, come on, everybody up!" Spike said a little dubiously. The avian apparition was large enough to have quite a bit of back to go around, and Groo ended up near the neck (which seemed good, giving him plenty of visibility and proximity to the bird's head.), and I sat behind him, with Spike and Illyria to each side of me, just behind the wings.

With a loud cry, the bird took off then, and headed south by southeast, in the direction I had pointed out for Groo. It didn't take long before we were six stories above the ground and travelling at what must have been a hundred and fifty miles an hour. "Not bad," I had to say, though I'm not sure any of the others could hear me over the wind.

"We've got trouble," Spike announced loudly, pointing ahead and to the right. It was still pretty dark, and the lights of the city didn't shine very bright up this high, but I could make out a shape in that direction. A sinuous shape, with large flapping wings.

"The dragon," I guessed. "Do you think it's spotted us yet?"

"It has," Illyria confirmed. How she could tell I didn't know, but I was starting to trust in her certainty.

"Try bearing to the left, Groo," I suggested, and the bird banked and turned. Things didn't look good though.

"It's not as fast as we are," Spike said, "but it can intercept us if we try to get to the offices."

"What about if we fly in a wide eastward arc," I suggested, waving to the left of us, "and lead it astray, then outrun it back?"

"Three problems with that," Spike decided. "One, it'll take too long. Two, the beastie might be too smart to take the bait. And three, we don't know how fast this birdy of ours can fly at top speed. The dragon might have greater endurance for a sustained chase, in which case we'd be in big trouble."

"Did anyone take distance-striking magic that would be effective against a fiend of that sort?" Groo suggested. (I guess they may have never had dragons in Pylea.)

"Oh hey, this might work," I said, coming up with a short brown stick. "Adjust course, fly in closer towards it, Groo." The bird banked back to the right again, and I tried to judge well. Had to be within effective range, but not so close that the wyrm would breathe fire at us...

Now! With a quick jerk of my wrist, I activated the magic stick. A disturbance flew through the air, and frost began precipitating around the line in which the stick was aiming. The effect drove into the side of the dragon's chest, and it screamed, its wings frozen for an instant. It fell twenty feet before recovering, and we passed right above it as it flew around in a tight circle, puffing smoke furiously and making for a building that it could land on and rest up.

"Wand of cold?" Spike said, impressed.

"Something like that."

By the time we got to the ruins of the Wolfram and Hart offices, it wasn't hard to guess where the action was. Lilah had committed a lot of her best forces here, it seemed – the shadow warriors, blind assassins and what looked like highly trained ninja vampires. Groo had the bird land on a nearby outcropping of wreckage and we all jumped down, which apparently was a signal to the bird that its job was done and it disappeared in a puff of white smoke.

There were five people at the center of the fray, four girls and a man, protecting a sixth, a fallen comrade, and taking a beating themselves. *Could it be?* I pulled out the truesilver sword (which I was really starting to like,) slashed an assassin across the face, elbowed a ninja in the solar plexus, and then got a look at the girl who staked him through the heart while he was trying to get his bearings.

It was...*her.*

I couldn't believe that I was staring into Buffy Summers' face again. She seemed to be equally stunned to have encountered me like this. She looked good – a little more mature than when I'd last seen her. She'd done something to her hair, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what.

And then I realized that a shadow warrior was about to stab her from behind, and there was no time for anything but to grab her by both arms and fall backwards. The dark soldier in question staggered a little, finding no resistance where he had expected there to be a warm, solid, breathing body to push his rapier through, and as I hit the ground I fumbled for a throwing knife and tossed it towards the apparition's arm. Rapier went flying. Good enough for now.

Buffy turned over, saw how close the guy had been to her, and smiled sheepishly. "Heard you guys had gotten into a kind of trouble you couldn't deal with," she said, with a bit of an ironic tone in her voice. "Not sure I believe it at the moment."

I laughed a little myself, seeing the mirror image of my trip to Sunnydale last year developing. Natasha's message had gotten through, about my apocalypse, and she was offering to help if I wanted it.

"Better keep an open mind," I quipped. "Things are seriously dire, and you couldn't have shown up at a better moment." Halfway through the last word, a tentacled, blue-hided demon lunged with two different heads at each of us, (out of at least six heads total,) and we both leapt up to continue the good fight. I took a firmer grip on my cutlass, Buffy caught an axe that someone tossed her (couldn't make out who), and we each had to work quickly to keep arms or chunks of upper chest from getting bitten off.

"So... Did you get the message from Natasha Devon?" I asked.

"Umm...yeah, actually, " HACK "but only en route." She still pronounced it 'ehnn rowwt'. "Willow saw a sign in the nether realm, said that you guys would need our help. We..."

All of a sudden, the demon did an about face and scampered away, its head trailing behind almost comically. I turned around and looked, and all about us the other nasties were doing the same. "That's a bad sign," I muttered to Buffy.

"Spike!" she called out. Another bad sign. She hurried over to him. "I'm glad you're okay."

Spike smiled tightly. "Might want to have a look at Red," he murmured, gesturing Buffy over. I came along too.

Willow Rosenberg – Red – had been the fallen comrade I'd noticed right at the beginning. Looked like head trauma, possibly internal injuries – she wasn't in the best of shape. (Being totally unconscious rarely helps.)

I looked up from her to see who was here and deduct the ones that I had come with to see who was in Buffy's party. Faith, that was good, she was someone who I felt I could count on in apocalypse. Rupert Giles... We'd had our issues, but I felt pleased that he'd come...probably was wanting to make sure

that Wesley was all right, since they'd been colleagues. I'd have to tell him, and Faith and Willow, that Wes was dead.

Two more girls – one of them, I realized with surprise, was Dana, the crazy girl that had given us a bit of a runaround here in LA, a few months ago. Training with Buffy or whoever seemed to be doing her good. The last one, maybe nineteen with dark, long dark hair and subtly exotic features, was leaning over Willow's body worriedly. I didn't know her, but she, too, moved with the grace and strength of a Slayer, even when not in combat. All told, that made a small and deadly team of six – four Slayers (two veteran and two newbies), an experienced and competent Watcher, and one very smart and powerful witch.

There was a sound like a clap of thunder, and I looked up... We were surrounded by some kind of bubble. Twenty feet away in all directions, and ten feet overhead, was a swirling mass of black, white, and every color in the rainbow. "What the blimy...?" Spike muttered, and stepped towards it.

*"No!"* Illyria declared, striding forward imperiously, shoving Spike back, and moving carefully towards the barrier herself. She stopped well back and *sniffed* at it. "Chaos space," she announced, returning to the rest of us. "And it is beginning to contract around this place. None of us can pass through it and survive – not even me. Our only escape would be magic."

I nodded. "Disrupt it somehow? Break down the wall?"

"Too risky." She shook her head. "Flying bubbles of chaos could strike anyone in the area. I would recommend transport magic – teleportation or passing through an enchanted doorway. Anything that can convey us outside without physically passing through the chaos bubble."

"That would be Willow's specialty," Faith said. "But she isn't in shape to be doing any hocus pocus at the moment."

"Did we bring any teleport spells?" I asked Groo, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer. If any of us had, we'd probably have used them to get here, instead of taking flying time on the big bird. I started going through my pockets anyway.

"What are you doing?" the fourth slayer called out, and I turned to see what she was talking about. Illyria had knelt over Willow's body, pushing her friend away, and I could see a bright shining blue light that lasted for several seconds. It faded out, and Willow's head shook and her eyes opened.

"What is it...? *Fred?*" I looked at Illyria, wondering how she'd react to that.

"Emm... no." She shook her head sadly. "Fred Burkle – is gone. I am Illyria."

"You... You infected her body!" Willow exclaimed.

Illyria nodded slowly. "I wasn't aware of it at the time."

Giles had hurried over to Willow by this point. "We are trapped in a bubble of chaos space and it is closing about us... We need a safe exit. Do you feel up to magic?"

Willow climbed to a sitting position. "I feel... great!" She looked around and spotted me. "Angel – where's your base of ops?"

"Ummm..." Nothing like being put on the spot. "There's a safe haven, but I'm actually not sure exactly where it is."

"Safer that way?" Faith wisecracked.

"What's your route in?" Giles asked. The swirling color around us did seem to be getting closer.

"Umm... there are a few deactivated magic doors around the city – I was given a string of glyphs to connect them up."

Willow's face lit up. "Read the symbols off to me." I repeated the formulae that Virginia had given me (at the same time as she had told me how to represent them in graphic form), When I was done she immediately started gesturing and mumbling under her breath.

"How did you help her?" I asked Illyria quietly. "Do you have your full powers back, or..."

Without a word, she presented me with a crystal – or what was left of one. Dull cloudy blue, slightly cracked. I peered at it, not quite sure what the point was. "The Bryce woman persuaded me to take one of her most powerful healing charms...just in case."

"Alright, chop chop!" Willow was calling out. I realized that there was a glowing white spot on the floor before her, and her Slayer friend and Buffy jumped down inside. One by one, as the chaos outside closed in, we all followed.

* * *

"Umm... okay, I didn't expect *that*." It was Virginia speaking, looking at the white circle of light floating about seven feet high in the reception foyer of her safe haven. "Angel... What's going...? Who are these...?" She focused on Willow, who was the last to drop down through the hole, and it closed behind her. Apparently Virginia could see the power inside her at first glance. "You have done this?"

"Umm... Yeah. Hope you don't mind us dropping in," Willow giggled nervously.

Virginia frowned slightly. "What's your coven?"

"Emm, no coven, exactly. Watcher."

"And a lone witch?" Mattasee asked. Willow nodded.

"Ummm... Hi!" Buffy went over to Virginia. "Sorry about the intrusion. I'm Buffy Summers. Prime Slayer." She didn't say "and you?" out loud, but somehow the look on her face and her body language conveyed it completely.

"Umm... My name is Virginia Bryce. I run a safe haven and wizardry school here. Nice to meet you, Miss Summers."

"Thanks." She shot a glance over at me, and then to Spike.

"Conference room free?" I asked Virginia.

"Except for your Miss Devon and young Andrew. Might get a little crowded with your rapidly growing retinue."

"Hey, we're not too proud to sit on the floor, are we?" Faith asked her friends.

But a card table and some folding chairs were brought in, and there were seats or perches for all. "So... What's the situation?" Buffy asked Spike and me once we were all settled.

"Well, we took out the key people of Wolfram and Hart's extended network here in the Los Angeles area, the Circle of the Black Thorn..." I began.

"...And now, they're moving Earth, Hell, and quite a few buildings to kill us for it," Spike finished. "You ran into some of the footsoldiers back there, not to mention that little 'chaos bubble' trap that was probably set for us."

"Okay," Buffy nodded, quickly coming to terms with the tactical realities. "So it's just a fight for survival now?"

"What about Gunn, and Wesley?" Faith broke in, clearly having done the math, and overheard (or known already) about Illyria and Fred.

I took a deep breath – this wouldn't be easy. "Wesley is dead. Gunn was badly wounded, but thanks to Virginia Bryce's help he's going to live...assuming that we can find a way to stop the Horde before they find this safe haven and kill everyone in it."

Buffy nodded... She had never really gotten along well with Wes, (having only known him in his "pompous fool" phase before the reality of life outside the Ivory tower of Watcher training had matured him and turned him into a man I was proud to call a friend...) and had never met Gunn – or Fred for that matter. "What's your plan?"

I looked over at Spike, and he made this grandly flamboyant wave to yield the question to me. "I... I'm not sure if we have one," I admitted. "We tried doing the attack and distract thing, but to be honest it didn't work very well, and I don't like the idea of going back to it."

"Yeah, we really don't have the numbers for that," Faith conceded.

"My instinct has always been to strike boldly for the heart," Buffy said. "How are they getting all of these guys here? I don't think there are that many hard-core demons on instant call to Wolfram and Hart in the whole state."

"Big-ass dimensional gateway," Spike jumped in with, beating me to the punch. "Lobby of the Hyperion hotel, wherever that is. One of Angel's old haunts, I think."

"Then our first objective is to close that gateway," Buffy said.

"I'd thought about that, but it seemed heavily risky," I admitted.

"Not to mention, there are still about a zillion demons that have already come through to deal with," Faith pointed out.

"If I had my full powers back, I know what I would do," Illyria announced suddenly. "I would 'omab' the gateway – deal with them all at once."

That threw me for a loop for a second...pretty much everyone else, too. *"Omab?"* I asked after a bit.

"I think it's an ancient demonic word that has no equivalent in human languages," Giles put in. "To..." he struggled to find the meaning, looking at Illyria. "More than close, to *negate* the existence of the gate."

"Not exactly," Illyria frowned too, evidently having similar difficulties expressing the thought in our language. "Consequences are not undone, but if the gate were *omabbed*, it would become convoluted in its own claudication in such a way that for anything that has passed through the gate that the reality of such a thing would be subverted. It would not exist in this world; it would not be returned to the world from which it came. For any but one in a million such bodies, it would never again exist on any known world."

"So...you wrap up the gateway with a pretty pink bow on it," Spike summarized, "and all the demons and dragons and dark warriors and such...just disappear? One out of every million of them get thrown to some other dimension, and the rest... either marooned in the void between the dimensions, or totally annihilated, nobody knows which?" After a few seconds, Illyria nodded slowly. "Sounds bloody good to me!"

"But Illyria doesn't have her full powers back." That was Gunn's voice, and I turned around to see him leaning against the wall just inside the doorway. "That seems like a pretty big problem with the plan."

"How long have you been there?" I asked. "You should be resting."

"Hey, Miss Bryce said I can't fight no more," Gunn protested. "She didn't say nothin' about no war councils. Let a brother have a *little* fun!" He didn't protest too much when I led him over and sat him down in my own seat.

"Okay, um...I have a question," Willow said after a moment. "How did Illyria lose her full powers? Did she have them when she...was brought forth from the Deeper Well?"

"How did you know about that?" Gunn interrupted.

"I've known of the Great Demons of the Deeper Well, including Illyria for years," Willow explained simply. "I'm sorry that I wasn't able to help Fred when you tried to call for me... I wasn't exactly able to get to the phone at the time..."

"So we heard," Spike muttered, staring pointedly at Giles, who had been the one giving me the brush-off at the time.

"I would have helped if I could – you know that Fred meant the world to me," Willow continued. "But it was too late once I got word..."

"It was probably too late when we called you," I assured her, "and as hard as it was to accept at the time, I'm starting to believe that Illyria's arrival was *meant* to be. For *our* side."

Willow nodded slowly and turned to Illyria. "When I saw you back at the ruins, I was just surprised – I guess I hadn't realized that you would look so much like she does. Er, 'like she did,' I guess. So, to get back to the subject... Your powers? When you returned to this earth?"

I looked over at Illyria, but she didn't seem in any hurry to answer the question. "We think she had most of them. But her full powers were destabilizing...creating rifts in the timeline and threatening to go thermonuclear. Wesley designed a device to draw them away from her, to save her life and others."

"And what happened to the energy after it was drawn away?" Faith prompted.

"The device was never designed to store my energies," Illyria said. "They were bled off, into a hundred different worlds."

"Okay, so much for that idea," Faith said with a sigh.

"If your powers were that unstable," Buffy put in, "is it safe to charge you back up again?"

"Yes," Illyria declared firmly. "I would not need a power level as high as I was brought forth with, and would only need to contain it for a short while before concluding the mission. It is feasible, if we can isolate a sufficiently powerful locus of mystic energy." She chuckled hollowly. "A 'really good' power-up."

I was starting to get a feeling about this mission of Illyria's, but I'd wait for an opportunity to ask her about it alone. "Well, I made sure to juice up before I left, but..." Willow started, then broke off, staring intently at Illyria, waving a hand slightly. "I'm not sure we're...compatible."

"I would tend to agree with that conclusion," Illyria said softly.

"And I'm not sure if I could even provide the kind of energy you're talking about... Any idea if you could explain the requirements?"

The ancient demon didn't reply to that for a long moment, cocking her head at odd intervals. "The operation would require a power source capable of generating a field strength of at least three hundred million Tarchons on the ancient Assyrian measurement system, somewhere in the frequency range of 'xhi' to 'gav', for a sustained period of at least eighteen seconds – a total energy of one point four times ten to the ninth dars..." She broke off, looking at Willow, who was staring back at her. "Are you familiar with this formal schema?"

"Umm..." Willow shook herself. "Yes, quite familiar. I confess I'm a little surprised that you're so familiar with the Assyrian nomenclature... That civilization developed thousands of years after you were consigned to the Deeper Well, didn't it?"

"I have familiarized myself with more recent developments," Illyria replied a little stiffly. "The Assyrian emphasis on quantification and categorization of mystic forces is quite intriguing...for mortal majik, that is." Willow smiled faintly at that.

"Well no, I wouldn't be able to fulfill those requirements...not with that specific type of magical burst, or such an intensity in a relatively short period of time. You know us mortal magicians... we're built a little better for the long haul than short sprints."

"Disappointing, on this occasion," Illyria remarked neutrally.

"Well, what about some other source of power?" Buffy suggested.

"A plasma drake could do it," Natasha put in. "But they're disagreeable creatures, and more than a match for everyone in this room, no offence. Plus, even if we could subdue one, I'm not sure how you get one to give off a burst of mystic energy on cue, to such precise specifications. So...not feasible."

"Also, nearly extinct in all known planes of existence," piped up Mattasee, who was apparently kibitzing on the council.

"It is a little out of our way," Illyria brainstormed, "but the heart of the 'Boca del Infierna' might provide sufficient intensity to..."

"Your references are probably out of date," Giles interrupted. "The Hellmouth has shut itself down, since the ultimate battle of Sunnydale High and, er, well, Spike's seemingly last stand, one should say. I was down in the Sunnydale crater about three months ago, measuring mystic energies, and they were down to the same level as many minor loci in North America, even in the underground tunnels as close as I could get to the central co-ordinates. I'm sure they've only gone down further by now – I'd have picked up traces of a rebound even in England."

"Hmm. A pity," Illyria said softly. I saw Buffy gritting her teeth.

"Draining a Velerian talisman would do it, I suppose," Willow muttered. "But they're only carried by Velerian sorcerers, and there aren't any of *them* left on Earth..."

"D'you suppose there are any of these sorcerers kickin' about in the realms that Wolfram and Hart is getting their army from, though?" Spike asked her with a cheeky grin.

"You mean...we somehow try to get Wolfram and Hart to bring a Velerian sorcerer across, complete with talisman...steal the talisman from him, and use it to entangle the gateway and subvert everybody who has passed through it...*including* the sorcerer himself?" Buffy weighed that. "Could work. But how do we convince them to bring a sorcerer like that across, that specific order and whatever?"

"And then, how do we find him, and get the talisman away from him without giving him a chance to destroy or drain it completely?" Willow put in.

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"And then, how do we find him, and get the talisman away from him without giving him a chance to destroy or drain it completely?" Willow put in.

"Not to mention fighting our way through to the gateway at the very heart of Wolfram and Hart's forces and giving Illyria enough time to get the job done," I chimed in. "Anyone else have any problems with this plan?"

Surprisingly enough, Illyria volunteered again. "I am no longer certain that I have the skill or knowledge to manipulate a gateway claudication with sufficient precision. The mathematical expertise of Fred Burkle will be helpful, but I require a comparable fund of mystic experience to draw upon."

Willow shook her head quickly. "That isn't my specialty."

"Nor mine," Giles volunteered. "Beings of lore from a thousand different worlds, yes, I would venture to consider myself an expert. But the actual ways and means of constructing passageways between planes of reality..." He shook his head slowly.

"A pity," she repeated, cocking her head. "There is only one mortal I have known to posess the experience I require: Wesley Windham-Pryce."

# III

**About fifteen minutes later**, the big war council had broken up, though nothing more had been decided. A lot of the people involved needed to eat and take care of other mortal necessities, and Virginia had poked her head in to mention that the morning twilight had started to break, making it more hazardous for Spike or myself to venture outside. Soon, unless the day turned especially stormy or there was an unscheduled solar eclipse, it would be impossible for us for the length of the day.

"Are you sure that Wesley's the only person who could have the information you need?" I asked Illyria. She had never needed to eat, and I was all right without drinking more blood for a while, though I could probably do with a pick-me-up considering how much effort I had expended over the past several hours. I hadn't quite gotten up the nerve to ask Virginia if she had any pig's blood or the like handy, though, and was kind of counting on Spike paving the way for me. (Though it occurred to me at that very moment that if there was only a little available, he would probably take it all without any consideration of my needs.)

"Undoubtedly there would be many who would possess it, probably even some in the Los Angeles area," Illyria told me. "Even possibly an individual who would be inclined to help us, though such knowledge seems to be more frequently gained by those with sinister motives in your modern world. The problem would be how to find such a person, with limited time."

"There's another option," Willow said, stepping up to the two of us, a breakfast burrito in one hand and a cafe latte in the other. "Magic might help. Not a full resurrection spell — I don't have the supplies for something like that — not to mention the side-effects and trying to recover Wesley's

body...but I know a ritual for summoning back souls that have passed beyond death, as ghosts. It's...a spell of significant power — not to be cast for personal reasons only, but I think this situation would justify it."

"Hmmm." I considered that. "What are the risks?"

"Nothing too bad," she hastened to assure me. "The clearest disclaimer is that souls you didn't intend may cross over at the same time. There isn't actually a provision in the ritual text to call on a certain person by name, but usually if you have a certain someone in mind, and their spirit is willing to answer, you'll get them." She turned to Illyria. "When Wesley arrives as a ghost, he should be able to merge with you briefly, and then you'll be able to use his experience as if it were your own, to complete the operation on the dimensional gate."

I thought about it. "Okay...let's wait until we've gotten the talisman, and then you can do it."

"I think it'd be better to cast the ritual now," Willow argued. "I've got plenty of power now; I'm not getting any stronger, while later on when things are happening fast I might be hurting for juice. Given the mystical energy that's flooding all of Los Angeles while that gate remains open, Wesley's ghost will probably be able to stick around indefinitely, until our mission is complete."

As I looked into Willow's eyes I realized that there was probably something else that she wasn't saying. Getting the Velerian talisman could be quite dangerous, and there was certainly a chance that someone, even Willow herself maybe, could die. She wanted to make sure that this was done beforehand, so that her passing wouldn't hurt the chances of us being able to pull off this plan more than it had to. While I hoped it wouldn't come to that — her mystic arts would be extremely helpful in the push back to the Hyperion hotel, and of course she was a god friend — I couldn't fault her logic. "Okay — what do we need?"

"Nothing much," Willow said. "A small room — everyone we can round up who actually knew Wesley. The ritual itself is entirely verbal."

"Everyone who knew Wesley," Illyria said. "Beside the three of us, that would be Spike, Gunn, the Bryce woman..."

"Faith, Buffy," I continued. "And...Giles." Rupert Giles was crossing the room to approach us as I said that, I realized. "Rupert?"

Before letting Giles get a word in edgewise, Willow jumped in and quickly told him of the plan to summon up Wesley's ghost. (She always had been something of an excitable girl once she got on a roll...I remember the time she chewed both Giles and myself out for the ways we were mistreating Buffy without realizing it...quite an impressive rant actually.)

"Erm, yes, that does seem a reasonable solution to the problem," Giles finished once she was finally done, "but I'm afraid I will have to recuse myself from the proceedings." Illyria and I started to stare at him at that point. "I'm familiar with the ritual you mention, and..well, I'm aware how sensitive it is to the subconscious thoughts of the participants. I have lost far too many people over the past few years. Dealing with my own ghosts, literally, is a distraction that none of us can afford at this time," he said stiffly.

Lost far too many people. The name "Jenny Calendar" rang through my mind. Giles' girlfriend — whom my evil alter-ego had taken away from him. I also knew that he had lost many friends in the Watchers when the forces of the First Evil attacked that institution, and only barely survived himself.

"I, uh — I came over to discuss the trap that we will have to lay for a Velerian sorcerer," Giles continued. "It occurred to me, Angel, that if Wolfram and Hart believe that they have found your hiding place, but that it is protected by a metolytic protective dome, a Velerian sorcerer may be the easiest way of breaking through that defensive field — even if they have to go to considerable lengths to find such a sorcerer."

"We can go and set up a trap somewhere, and I can create the protective dome!" Willow added. "Although I'll need to let it drop before the sorcerer actually has a chance to start hammering away at it... that would be bad for me and bad for the talisman. Good idea, Giles. We'll just do the ghost spell, and then get on that." Giles smiled, nodded, and backed away.

"Maybe we shouldn't ask Buffy to take part, either," Willow decided. "She doesn't know Wesley that well, and wasn't on the best of terms with him — it could be a source of bad energy, which is never helpful. What about Virginia?"

"It was several years ago, but I think they were quite close," I said, weighing it in my mind. "I think we'd be better off with her than without."

"Okay, I'll try to round up everyone else and you can ask her," Willow said, bustling off. Illyria raised an eyebrow and stayed where she was, turning to explore the wall in exhaustive and minute detail.

When I found Virginia, she was talking with Spike and hailed me down. "There's a new development," she said quickly. "Apparently a remarkably thick smoke bomb of some sort was just detonated high over Los Angeles. Nobody seems to know much, but it looks as if the dust and cloud won't dissipate for perhaps two days, and almost no sunlight will get through."

"Wolfram and Hart," Spike said. "Protecting their own asses...making sure that these knights of Soron and ninja vampires and everyone else who can't handle the sunlight doesn't have to take cover. For two days, it's the next best thing to eternal night."

"I don't think it's all about their people," I said after a moment. "I know Lilah Morgan, and this just stinks of her kind of arrogance. For the most part, she's doing it for *our* benefit. Yours and mine, Spike. She wants to make sure that we have full mobility, even while the sun is up."

"But why?" Virginia asked.

"Because it's no fun if I'm at a disadvantage," I said. "It's not about winning with her, so much as about beating me."

"Someone sounds full of themselves," Spike jibed.

I let it go for the time being. "We're doing a ritual to call forth Wesley's spirit. Willow wants both of you there, since you both knew him."

"Where?" Spike asked.

* * *

We ended up doing the ritual in a small room in the sanctuary that I hadn't seen before...a spare bedroom, or that was what it had been before Willow got at it. When I first saw it, Willow and Faith were carrying the bed out into the larger lounge that lay just outside. Most of the other furniture had already come out.

I watched as Willow went back in and evaluated it with a critical eye. Two pieces of furniture were still there, sitting against the far wall — a couch and a loveseat. Willow seemed to evaluate the empty space for a moment, and nodded in satisfaction. "That'll be good enough. Come on." All of the intended participants were nearby, and at Willow's direction we stepped into the room, the door was closed, and a wide circle was formed.

"Think only of Wesley, concentrate on him," Willow warned us softly before beginning. "I call upon Hades, the arbiter of the paths of the dead, to lend us his guidance in this time," she called out ringingly. and paused for a moment.

"We are in hiding, hunted by our enemies, and the spirit of he who is dear to us is far away. Unseen by us, he walks the paths of your kingdom. Extend your rod, oh Hades, and guide our friend to us in spirit and in sight!"

There was a soft poof. I looked into the centre of the circle, but Wesley's face (or any part of him,) was very definitely not there.

"Took you long enough to invite us over!" a familiar voice called. Following the sound, I turned about... and there, at the far end of the room, there were people sitting on the furniture. Ever so slightly transparent people, which I guess qualified them as ghosts, if the fact that they had all died didn't.

On the loveseat was Wesley, smiling that relaxed and contented grin that I saw so rarely. His legs were spread wide, allowing Fred to sit mostly in front of him, and his arms were encircling her waist from behind. On the couch, Cordelia Chase sat at one end, her hair dark brown and shoulder length like it was

when I first met her in Los Angeles. In the middle of the couch, holding Cordy's hand, was none other than...Allen Francis Doyle!

All of my friends and team members from here in Los Angeles who had passed away...and now they outnumbered the ones who were still with me, come to think of it. It also occurred to me that they were acting very couple-y, which kinda made sense. Each of those pairs had had considerable romantic sparks, only to be interrupted prematurely by the untimely death of one partner. Now all of them were together in death...no reason, assuming that the cosmos allowed it, that they shouldn't be able to pick up where they left off.

"Wait a second," Gunn broke in, staring at one spirit in particular. "They said that you were..."

"Destroyed?" Fred asked in that soft Texas accent. "Consumed? You should know that that isn't possible, Charles. The soul is immortal — which is the same as sayin' that it's indestructible. Why were you takin' the word of a crazy doctor who admitted that he didn't know nothin' about the rise of Illyria anyway?" She smiled shyly.

"I... I guess we weren't thinking straight," I admitted, more than a little overwhelmed. Willow had warned that other souls might answer the call, but to see all of them at once was more than I could handle.

"Though, I kinda get why y'all had to believe that at the time," Fred continued. She was talking more Texan than usual, which generally meant she was feeling nervous. "You were hell-bent on resurrectin' me, and that wasn't the point. Illyria had his... its, her — part to play. I understand that now." And she giggled slightly, as if there were something that she knew that she couldn't tell any of us yet.

"So..." Illyria shook her head, stepping up to Wesley, and making a determined effort to avoid Fred for the moment. "Do you know why we have summoned you here?"

"Yes, and I'd be happy to help," he assured her. "But that can wait until later. Right now, you've got a talisman to steal."

"Okay, this all-knowing ghost thing is kinda starting to get on my nerves," I admitted. "Cordy, Doyle — it's so great to see you guys. You're doing okay I hope?"

"Couldn't be better, now," Doyle said, winking at Cordelia.

"Don't worry, none of us are going anywhere until your mission is done," Cordy assured me. "There'll be time for catching up. Come to think of it, I wanna go on this talisman mission. Could come in handy, having a few ghosts around." She concentrated on a cup that was sitting in a small alcove out of the way, and suddenly it zipped across the room, nearly smacking Gunn on the side of the face, and smashed into the opposite wall, shattering into a few dozen pieces.

"Hey!" Gunn complained.

"Sorry, new to this telekinesis stuff," she said. "Didn't mean for it to go quite that fast."

"Good to have you aboard," I said, looking up towards I-knew-not-what.

"Oh, Will, before I forget," Cordelia added. "I have a message for you."

"A...a message?" Willow repeated, seeming first incredibly confused, then cautiously hopeful.

"Yeah, from a...a Tara McRay? Something like that. Umm, she sends you all her love, emm, and she's sorry that she couldn't make it herself, but you-know-who have her incredibly busy off on the Astral plane."

"Tara?" Willow repeated, "I...I know who? Are you sure that it's really her and not some kind of psychic impostor?"

"Message came with an approved identity seal just as we were leaving to come here," Cordelia replied slowly. "As far as 'you-know-who', that's kind of afterlife code. The forces of good, the powers that be."

"Wow," Willow repeated, a small tear showing at the corner of her eye and the muscles in her jaw trembling slightly. "She's working for them directly, now? Like you guys are?"

"Looks like," Doyle said. "Never met her, to the best of my knowledge, but there are a lot of us."

"You should be proud," Fred chimed in.

"I...I am proud," Willow said in a soft whisper, brushing away the tear, and another one that was forming nearby. "Now let's go make her proud too."

* * *

There were delays in setting up our trap for a Velerian sorcerer, of course... Willow had to do some crash research and practice to be sure that she was up for creating a meto-whatzit dome and maintaining it long enough, (and holding it up against anything short of a sorcerer that Wolfram & Hart might throw at it.) Giles and Virginia researched possible locations for our fake "hideout" in the meantime.

I pulled Illyria aside for a quick chat as soon as I could — something had been nagging at me. I got to the point as quickly as possible: "This plan of yours...convoluting and subverting the gateway — are there any risks to you?"

She was silent for what seemed like a long moment, though it probably wasn't any longer than fifteen seconds. "In my old body, in the old days, there would have been none," she began resentfully.

"And now?" I pressed, my guess already pretty much confirmed.

"They are considerable...though I am unsure of the exact chances."

"Of what nature?" I asked, and then made an attempt to throw away the euphemism of risk analysis. "What might happen to you?"

She shrugged. "Very generally...serious injury, death. Total annihilation. I cannot be more specific — attempting to perform such an operation from a human shell is something that has never been done before." Illyria gazed into my face while I stayed silent.

"But these possibilities only run a slight chance of preventing me from completing this mission."

"Yeah, I get that," I told her. "It's a kamikaze scenario — you may die, but you'll take the Wolfram and Hart army with you." I took a deep breath. "You'll save us all."

"You'll save yourself," she shot right back. "If you can provide the energy that this endeavour will require, and escort me safely to the gateway. I would not be able accomplish those things and carry out the plan by myself."

"Small comfort," I put in.

Illyria ignored that, suddenly lost in her own thoughts. "It has been...strange, to encounter the spirits of Wesley and Winnifed Burkle," she said after a long moment.

"Yeah, I bet," I replied. One was the individual who had been closest to her since she had come forth from the Deeper Well, and the other was the girl whose body her essence had taken over as its vessel.

"That has triggered questions about whether there will be a continuation after this phase of my existence is complete," She seemed somber...contemplative. "Is there an afterlife for such as myself? I have already slept millennia in the deeper well and wakened in a world not my own — it seems unlikely that a continued existence on some other plane would be more compatible."

"Or maybe I will become one with the rhythms of the cosmos." She cocked her head, considering. "I believe I would appreciate that."

"Then I hope you find it...when the time comes," I told her.

Illyria turned and stared at me as if she had forgotten I was there, and then smiled. "Frankly, I think I would just as soon meet my reckoning now as later, whatever the fate laid out for me should be. I do not understand this world, so full of trials and objectives that seem like only shadows to what I have left behind." She shook her head. "How better than to end it than with a triumph?"

"Hey, you'll get no argument from me," I laughed.

There was an awkward moment, and Illyria seemed to be actually straining for some excuse to leave. "I should...consult with the witch Willow Rosenberg. I have had some experience with metolytic protective fields that may be of assistance to her, though creating them myself is not an ability I have ever developed."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." Illyria seemed to be about to say something else, then evidently changed her mind (*its* mind? So hard to know what pronouns to use in this situation,) without another word. I waited a moment and headed back myself, to get an update from Giles.

I didn't mean to overhear, or to lurk in the shadows. Moving stealthily is just kind of a habit by this point, but I happened to see Buffy going up to Spike without either of them noticing me. It would be hard to say which of the two of us were more surprised when, just as Buffy was about to open her mouth, Spike cut her off. "Don't. Just don't start."

I couldn't quite see her face from where I was, but somehow I knew she blinked quickly in that manner she has. "Why not?"

"Because there's nothing left worth saying, for either of us," he bit back. "You're moving on, you've found His Bastardness, excuse my bitter honesty, and you've fallen for him. But you can't expect me to be happy about the clear revelation that I was nothing more than the middle, so far, of a string of 'lads of the moment' who just happened to be convenient and fit your type. 'Centuries-old vampire with a dark past who might or might not be evil.'"

Buffy seemed to be quite at a loss now, and I was wondering if that was just because she'd missed most of Spike and my chase through Rome, or if there was something about *her* situation that both of *us* were missing. "Um, uhh..." But she wasn't really able to head off Spike's rant.

"And you know what else, Miss 'Attain-a-thon'?" He stared fiercely into her eyes, until she shook her head slightly. *"I HOPE YOU GET BURNT!* I *really* do." And with that, he stalked off.

"Idiot," I mumbled under my breath, taking another path through the passages of the school myself, so as not to embarrass Buffy by letting her realize that I had heard.

* * *

"Hello there, sir..."

I looked up and smiled to see Faith walking towards me. "Mister Hot Shot Big Wig CEO, how was your day?" She grinned teasingly at me.

We had set our trap for a Velerian sorcerer in a typical abandoned warehouse. Willow had set up the protective dome in the middle of the gigantic open space, with Spike, Illyria, and Groo. All of the rest of us were up on the catwalks, watching and waiting, protected from mystical observation by a cloaking spell. This warehouse was only about a block ahead of the leading edge of horde activity. It wouldn't be too long before things started to happen.

I pulled my thoughts away from the tactical situation and thought about Faith's question. "Actually, all casual evidence to the contrary, it's been a better day than any other for a year."

"I get that," Faith replied. "Fighting the good fight, making a difference. Getting the blood pumping in your veins...among other places." She looked down pointedly, and I realized that I was still carrying a plain black mug about one quarter filled with cow's blood. Took another sip.

"You done good, brother," Faith continued, surprising me. "That road to redemption that you're always talking about...the road you helped me find. Looks to me like you've only got a few more steps to go."

"I'm not so sure about that," I protested. "Doesn't seem like I've gotten very far at all. And it's not the kind of road that just ends."

"We'll see." Faith shrugged that one off.

"So, what about you?" I continued. "What have you been up to since the hellmouth came crashing down?"

"Oh, I keep busy," Faith said with a soft laugh. "I've started patrolling the Hellmouth Mark 2, actually. That's in Cleveland, by the way."

"Yeah, I've heard."

"Got a cool pad, a bit of a day job at the YW... secret identity, the whole nine yards." She chuckled again. "A few slayers of the next generation to look after — I can't handle the whole schoolmistress/Watcher deal, but if there are any girls who just need to be shown how to take care of themselves in a fight, they can send them to me."

"I bet," I agreed with a smile.

"And, well, there's a guy in the picture," she added cagily after a moment. "We got a bit of an unusual deal...you know me and the "L" word — or the "C" word..."

"Pretty much." That fit perfectly with what I remembered of Faith, unwilling to even say the words 'love' or 'commitment' out loud.

"...But we hang out, and have fun, and kill a lot of nasty creatures together," Faith finished. "Spike might have mentioned him, actually, they were both in Sunnydale around the same time. Robin Wood? Friend of Buffy's...platonic, mostly — orphaned son of a Slayer from the 70s?"

"Umm, yes, actually." Spike hadn't had much good to say about him, but I didn't see any reason to point that out. "So you like him, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, he has his moments," she agreed.

"Then I'm happy for you," I told her. "By the way...um, do you know what's been going on with Dana since she left LA? I'm not sure whether to go over and say hi or, you know, keep my distance in case she gets confused again and attacks me."

Faith made a face. "Umm, to be honest, I didn't even know that she'd been here before. New 'cruit, joined the team just a few months ago...she made the rounds with pretty much all of the original crew, except for Xander... Willow, Giles, then Buffy."

"Okay," I nodded. "Did you hear anything about...well, she was in a mental asylum. They were trying to keep her restrained in there after she got her full Slayer powers."

"Oh." Faith absorbed this. "No, I thought I was the only Chosen one who ever went off the deep end. Joking, I know it's not quite the same deal."

I paused and changed the subject slightly. "What about the last one? I mean, what's she doing here, why's she risking her neck to save us? I don't think she's ever met any of my crew before — does she have relatives here in Los Angeles?"

"Kennedy? No, she's here because of Willow. Protective-like. Willow was bound and determined to come, so Kennedy is here to back her up... " She canted her head. "Did you hear that?"

I hadn't, (so much for heightened vampire senses), but when I actually started to listen there was no mistaking the sound. A thunderous banging on the warehouse wall, about forty feet down from the doors. Were these monsters so dumb that they'd bash their way in before even looking for a door? (Then again, going in by the front door can be a good way to walk into an ambush.)

Sure enough, soon a huge opening had been beaten out of the solid bricks, and a pack of trolls started to spread out around the warehouse floor, while a pair of ogres waited menacingly just inside. It didn't take the trolls long to find the dome. They peered and prodded at it, punched and body-blocked it without results. One even jumped onto it and started scampering up the rough side, which apparently was crossing a line — the dome reacted with a furious jolt of force that sent the poor individual flying.

Quickly a few trolls were left to stand watch while everyone else left — presumably to report this phenomenon to a higher-up. Faith excused herself and left to talk to someone else.

I looked down the catwalk the other way, and saw Mattasee, Virginia's student, the young demon. He had volunteered to join us in the field for this part of the mission, though he didn't seem quite sure why he cared so much. At the time, I hadn't asked many questions, knowing that going up against one of these Velerian sorcerers we could use all the magical know-how we could get.

"Umm...Mattasee. You'll let me know as soon as you sense anyone with magical powers approaching the building?" I began, a little awkwardly.

"Ermm..." He, also, flicked a glance at the mug in my hand, and in frustration I drained it and set it aside. "Yes, yes, of course."

"Thanks," I said. There was a bit of an awkward silence. "So...how did you end up studying with Miss Bryce? I don't...I don't even know very much about the Vegrar people, except that you're generally not terribly aggressive."

He smiled at me, but I wasn't quite sure what emotion lay underneath that smile. "Well, I grew up in a 'kalbos', a traditional Vegrar...I suppose you could call it a family unit, with a little bit of a stretch. Two adult males, two adult females, seven offspring total, including me. It was a strict kalbos, which

means that the offspring never leave, never see anyone but their broodmates and the adults of the kalbos, until they reach their maturity at 400 lunar cycles."

"That's... " I did a little mental math. "Thirty-four years?"

"More like thirty-two actually. I didn't quite reach maturity in the kalbos, though. One of the mothers was an enchantress, and started teaching me majik as well as the usual disciplines of combigeometry, algebrulus, quasibiology and socioeconomics." He took a deep breath. "She overdosed on dark wizardry and destroyed the kalbos nest, killing many of its members. I escaped, but for many — years — I struggled with the lure of black magic myself. An acquaintance of mine on the street, a human, joined Virginia's program — I'm not sure how, and he sought me out. At first I didn't want to enlist; I found her strict philosophy much too confining. But after very nearly getting myself on the hit list of the Fell brethren, I realized that I needed a bit more structure in my existence. Miss Bryce has been amazing to me."

"And you seem to be doing well with the white wizardry," I remarked. "Just how much can you do?"

He shrugged humbly. "My specialty is divinatory and information magic, though I've been branching out into constructive alchemy. I should have a few surp— Oh, hello? Who do you want to talk to, me or him?"

I turned about to see the ghost of Doyle waiting patiently. "Actually, I'm carrying a message for you, young sir. Miss Rosenberg said that she wanted to talk to you through the dome."

"Oh, of course." He nodded at me. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Umm, just a second," I said, frowning. "Through the dome, as in, just on either side? Because, well, forgive me for stating the obvious, but you can't leave the cloaked area up here on the catwalks."

"Oh, no, not like that," Matt assured me. "I'll stay in the cloak. The witch and I agreed on one small 'channel' for conferences and this sort of thing. There's a spot on a particular catwalk...technically the cloak is weakened slightly there, though it's still just about impossible to notice unless you're looking from the right angle. "

"Which is the one leading directly away from the dome," I guessed. "Okay. Just wanted to be clear on that." Mattasee turned around and left, and I turned to Doyle; after a few seconds I burst out into nervous laughter. "I'm sorry, man, it's just so weird to see you there...and to see through you, ever so slightly. Everyone else I've only lost a few months ago at most, but you..."

"I know, man," Doyle agreed with a cheerful smile. "S'been too long. But I gotta tell you, friend — I couldn't be more proud of you. Sure, you've made a few mis-steps along the way, but who doesn't? I — well, in a way I think that I was the one who got you started on this great adventure..."

"You were," I agreed softly.

"And I think that I'll be here to see the end of it."

"I'm not so sure," I countered, shaking my head. "I'm not dead. And if Illyria's plan works, then it isn't the end of anything."

"I think it will be," Doyle insisted firmly. "And the beginning of something entirely different. I know that I only got to know you for a few months, but to everything there is a season. It was my time to pass on."

"Will you guys stop doing that?" I asked with a grin. "Going on and on about how everything's 'meant to be.' It's really annoying."

"Sorry man, but it's a little hard to get where I've been and not feel that way. If I could only tell you some of the things that I've done, the places that I've seen...but regs don't allow for it." He sobered. "I know that it was harder for you an' Cordy, being the ones left behind, but you came to terms with the fact that I'd gone in good time."

"I think about that," I blurted out. "Not coming to terms with other people's deaths, but the afterlife itself. I've been dead at least once, and from what I understand, when I accidentally revoked the curse in Sunnydale, my soul would have reverted to the great beyond again."

"I think that's right," Doyle agreed. "Can't say for sure, but..."

"Then why don't I remember anything about it?" I asked. "Not peace and paradise, not torture and torment, not even timeless waiting in some dreary purgatory. I have no recollections of either of those periods, except for the memories of...of the soul-less vampire."

"I think you're a special case, man," Doyle assured me. "Memory's a bit of a tricky thing with souls in the afterlife, or at least it's very different from mortal memory. Getting re-joined to a vampire body that's been active and aware the whole time — it probably wipes out or represses your soul memory." He shook his head. "Try not to worry about it, man."

"I'll second that," Cordy said, *whooshing* straight through me to take Doyle's arm. "You always did brood too much."

I smiled at both of them. "So tell me. Are you guys really...you know, a couple now?"

"Yeah, yeah," Cordy agreed, turning to look into Doyle's face. Doyle just grinned like an idiot.

"It's kinda weird, I have to admit," I mentioned, thinking about people...you know, dating up there. It is 'up', right?"

"Not physically up, but symbolically," Doyle assured me. "As far as romance...well, in a lot of ways it's like this world. Just...you know..."

"Better!" Cordy finished his thought, making one of her cute faces.

I laughed. "What about Wesley and Fred?"

"Well, bear in mind that he's only been deceased a few hours," Doyle began. "Sometimes time passes much more quickly for us, but this hasn't been one of those. They're both still getting used to him being—"

"On the other hand, they *were* dating when she died," Cordelia pointed out. "Somehow I doubt that things won't go the same way again."

"I'm happy for them," I said, and then spotted someone off on an intersecting catwalk. "Excuse me — I really want to talk to you guys more later, but..."

"Go right ahead," Doyle insisted, and I hurried past them.

"Can I have a word?" I asked softly when I caught up with Buffy.

She just stood there for a moment, looking at me, and then nodded. "Umm...how about over there?" Over at one end of one of the catwalks nearby was a small, mostly enclosed metal box, just big enough for a few people to sit in. "Are you gonna throw a hissy fit too?" she asked as soon as I had stepped inside.

I paused just a moment, then tried to relax as I sat down. "Actually, nope." Decided to not dance around the subject of what I'd heard. "Seeing Spike play the drama queen card made me realize that I really don't want to do it too." I smiled, and she nodded in acceptance. "I do have a few questions though."

Buffy shook her head. "Maybe it'd be better if I try to explain some things first. It's a confusing and embarassing situation. Okay, um, the Immortal." She took a deep breath. "At some point, after realizing that I'd moved into 'his' town, the Immortal decided that he *desired* me." She put a shadow of a bass rumble on the emphasized word, and shook her head in near disbelief. "Came up with a heck of an opening gambit too, in the form of some unsolicited assistance. On a case involving a deadly cult of chaos worshippers and a set of manuscripts detailing the activities of vampire slayers over three thousand years ago."

I thought about the way *he* had gotten involved in the capo caper, without even asking. "Yeah, that seems to be a favorite move of his lately, just butting in helpfully."

"Well, anyway, I kinda wanted to find out more about him, once he involved himself in my business. Just to kind of figure him out, see what his motives were. And to try to guess if he would get all furious and take it out on other Slayers if I rejected him. So the obvious ploy was to..."

"To let him think he was courting you," I said, seeing it, and kicking myself mentally. "And did you realize that you were also letting three quarters of Rome think that the two of you were an item?"

"To be honest, it was a while before I even realized that they cared," Buffy admitted. "Still used to America, where people won't even let themselves believe that a vampire slayer exists, let alone make

her a quasi-celebrity. But things are different in Europe, and the Italians apparently love to gossip even more than high school girls."

"So, umm... I've put an end to the gambit, or at least I hope I have. Didn't reject him outright, but extricated myself as well as I could with flattery. Told him his world is so mysterious and dangerous, that I'm not sure I'm ready for it, that I don't trust myself around his incredible charisma and obvious prowess, yadda yadda yah. Hopefully that'll buy me a little time to think of a new angle at least. Oh, and he mentioned that the two of you were in town after you'd left, and bragged about the whole Darla/Drusilla thing. Frankly, that's the point where I'd realized I'd learned all I needed to know, and where I got the idea for how to get rid of him a while."

"Okay..." I was starting to put things together, and still not quite sure of how one thing added up. "So Andrew just heard the gossip around town about you and the Immortal, and bought into it?"

"Andrew lives in a world of his own that has very little to do with what the rest of us consider to be reality," Buffy said flatly. "It started with the gossip, but no matter what I said to him about the situation, he just took that as further confirmation that I was 'in love.' Sheesh! By the way, I'm sorry that you had to deal with him about the whole Dana situation, but he was the best field agent we had who could get to Los Angeles in time." She paused for a beat. "We need more field agents."

"It's all right," I assured her, then thought I might try to tease gently. "And the dozen Slayers you sent him as backup?"

"Were not meant for a power play against you," she hastily pointed out, "not that I exactly chewed him out for the way things went down there. I got as many Slayers as I could down to LA because I thought that they'd be good for trying to track down Dana, sympathizing with her...and if necessary, subduing her. Having been through some of the same stuff themselves, you know. But I couldn't allow you to keep custody of her, not that I don't have faith in the good intentions of you and all of your own team..."

"Um, well, what then?"

Buffy paused momentarily, her face expressive in her moment of lethologica. "Well, you guys already had quite a lot on your plate, right? You wouldn't be able to take care of her by yourself; you'd be handing her over to specialist with 'the firm.' And I had no way of being sure that she wouldn't fall into the wrong hands from there. Gotta be a bunch of clients and employees of Wolfram and Hart who would love to have access to an unstable Slayer...to turn her strength to dark purposes."

"Hmm... I guess I hadn't really thought of it that way," I admitted. "And I'm glad that Dana seems to be doing better."

"Yeah, she is. Still has a bit of a loopy anger thing going on inside her head, but she only lets it out when it's time to pound on the bad guys. And yes, her teachers have paid extra care to teaching her about identifying bad guys and telling them apart from scary but good guys."

"Well, we all make a few mistakes on that score," I admitted. "Not that it's any of my business, but I'm sorry that Spike's being such a pain in the ass about the whole thing."

"Well, I can't imagine you're too broken up about the fact that you're looking pretty good by comparison," Buffy teased.

"Umm... Not exactly, but it's actually not all about competition over you, when it comes to Spike and me. The past little while, oh, for cripe's sake we've actually bonded as partners. I kinda respect him, and whatever you and he had, and I don't really want to see him throw it away over a misunderstanding!"

The shock on Buffy's face was quite obvious. "Well, there's no way I can stop you from saying something to him about it, I guess. Give him a fair chance to try and set things right, make up a portion of what he lost with that blunder." She paused. "Speaking of making up for blunders, well...about the whole Fred/Illyria thing."

Ahh. "Yeah, go on?"

"I've gathered that the ending is considered to be water under the bridge, but I can't help but think that our side still has some apologies to make over the way that things were handled."

I started to protest, then dropped it and nodded. I was still a little upset about that myself, to be honest.

"Some of the responsibility is mine. As I'm sure you've realized, all of us who knew you were very... concerned when we found out about the deal you'd taken with Wolfram and Hart. Not that anybody doubted that your heart was in the right place..."

"It is, but it's just kinda sitting there and not doing much," I broke in. Buffy shot me an annoyed look. "Not really the right time for vampire humor?"

"No." Buffy shook her head and tried to find a place to continue. "But the only reason we could see that they'd have offered the deal was to corrupt you. On the other hand, you've made it very clear that Los Angeles is your town, and you don't appreciate having anyone else, even me, tell you how to handle your business."

I had to admit that much was true. "You could always have called me to a summit meeting, if you were that worried. Neutral ground and all that. I always cared about what you thought, Buffy, even if sometimes I didn't agree with your solutions."

She nodded. "I did think about that, a few times recently, but things have been so busy. I told the guys that if you called, I wanted to be the only one you spoke to...but as it happened, I wasn't reachable at the time, and I gather that Giles took it as an excuse to get snippy. He was more worried than any of us, but he does have a tendency to obsess about the worst when it comes to you."

"I can see why," I commented.

"Willow was really torn up when she realized that she was too late," Buffy admitted in a low voice. "I think she kinda had an unrequited crush on Fred, from the time she came down here to save your soul again. Not that she isn't happy with Kennedy, of course — it's just one of those things, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess I do," I admitted. For some reason that reminded me of the fact that Fred herself used for some reason to have a thing for me, at least according to Cordelia. Back when I'd first brought her home from Pylea, which kinda made sense. I got back to the subject. "Well, thanks. It really helps to have heard where you were comi—" Just at that moment there was a knock on the metal wall of the box. "What is it?"

The unfamiliar slayer poked her head in. "Hey, Buff. Just wanted to ask your opinion about ambush attack patterns."

"All right," As she was getting up, Buffy turned to me. "You should probably weigh in, too."

* * *

We all watched as the figure, shrouded in dark robes, walked briskly into the warhouse below through the doors, crossed over to the dome, examined it for a few minutes, and then left the way that he had come. "Andarpin warlock," Wesley whispered to me, and I nearly jumped off the catwalk. I hadn't realized he was there. "Gone to make his report. Hopefully, the next to arrive should be the Velerian."

"At the head of a task force, probably," I muttered.

"No, probably just a squadron. I doubt Lilah wants to commit too many of her forces to a location of our choosing lest it should prove to be a deathtrap." He chuckled to himself. "Of course, she couldn't possibly realize what kind of a trap we have in store."

"I hope not," I agreed.

"You look concerned, Angel," he said softly, following as I headed down yet another catwalk, or possibly one of the same ones as before all over again.

"I'm replaying it all over in my head," I admitted. "Especially... Well, just after I told you guys that what I wanted was to destroy the Circle, they..."

"The scroll that they demanded you sign," he filled in. "The one that they said was the real prophecy about a vampire with a soul getting to be human as a reward — and that by signing it, you would never get that reward, should it happen to be about you."

"Damnit, what did you do, like review the last day of my life as soon as you got to heaven?" I burst out. "Don't you have better things to do?"

"It isn't like that," he said. "Somehow we just...know, the things we need to. I know about that. It's been said that death is a moment of oneness with the universe and the totality of history."

"So," I muttered, a little upset, "Do you know if it... Is it real? Does my signing that scroll actually...can it actually change things?"

"I'm afraid that it does," he told me sadly. "It is not really the 'original' — since when does signing the original of a prophecy change anything? It's actually an obscure sort of a mystically binding codicil...as long as your signature remains on that scroll, it can keep you from realizing the promised reward mentioned in the prophecy...assuming that it was about you in the first place."

"Damn it," I growled. "Was hoping that you could tell me it was all a bluff. Oh well. It still had to be done."

"Of course, destroying the codicil would nullify its effect," Wesley mentioned, "but I'm not sure how we could arrange that. I can't even tell you where it is — doesn't seem to have been at the offices of Wolfram and Hart when they were destroyed, or at the locales of any of the Black Thorn members."

"It's okay," I told him. "I was never doing this for a reward in the first place. Uhm, Natasha?" I looked at her as she hurried up to the two of us.

"Wanted to make sure you heard this — Aaron got another message from the powers. Seems to relate to our plans with the Velerian sorcerer."

"Hmmm." Wesley's face creased in thought. "What's the text?"

"'Things will move quickly, and his power is great. You will have to react even more quickly if you hope to prevent him from taking lives.'"

"Well, we're already planning to move as quickly as we can," I said thoughtfully. "We'll make sure to pass that message along to everyone involved."

Wesley nodded. "I'll get started on that."

"Um, so, Natasha," I said. "Do you mind if I ask how you met Aaron? It hasn't really come up...you said that you were training a potential Slayer until last year..."

"Right," she confirmed. "Well, after we got Shannon into Sunnydale, I was a bit at loose ends, and Groo wanted to head south towards Los Angeles. We'd both heard stories of strange stuff going on here...rain of fire, sun blotted out, and Groo thought that you guys, and Cordelia, might be in the thick of it."

"Yeah, that's one way to put it," I muttered under my breath. Natasha shot me a look, but I didn't really want to explain, so I just made a 'go on' motion. After a pause and a shrug, she did.

"We ended up in a suburb pretty far on the outskirts just as the cult of Jasmine was building up. As it happened, though, there were quite a few people who'd seen her on TV broadcasts from the city or heard her on the radio, a much larger section of the town had caught wind of the whole business and were suspicious of it, to the point of staying clear of all media."

"Huh, interesting," I muttered. "Didn't know there were places like that." Jasmine had been... well, she had looked like a beautiful and regal woman, her soul coming from some dimensional realm far away, her body born of Cordelia and my son Connor...which pregnancy had ultimately been the cause of Cordy's death — her body had been drained of energy to form Jasmine's vessel early. But nobody could see or hear Jasmine or even be near her without worshipping and adoring her — not without an infusion of Jasmine's or Cordelia's blood in their system, at least.

"It didn't last long," she said in an aside. "As Jasmine's power grew, I think she was able to manifest her influence without audiovisual contact...to convert someone through a face to face conversation with an already-converted proxy, for example, or eventually to just concentrate and send a field of her energy across a large area, taking everyone. At the time, though, Groo and I stuck around, definitely suspicious to the point of paranoia ourselves." She took a deep breath at this point.

"I happened to see a pack of Jasminites setting out through the streets, and we followed them as they broke into a house. At first I thought it was an attempt at forced conversion...to turn on a television for one of Jasmine's personal appearances and wrestle a family in front of it, that sort of thing. By the time we realized it was murder they had in mind, it was almost too late."

"Murder?" I repeated. "But Jasmine didn't...well, there were her 'personal guests,' but..."

"I know. Her movement was rarely directed towards violence against humans, even the unconverted — just 'enlightening' them. They scourged out demons, of course, but it was quite clear that this band of Jasmine acolytes tried to kill him. Aaron, I mean."

"I wondered," I mentioned. "Of course, if Aaron was a link to the Powers, the ones that Jasmine had betrayed and turned her back on, maybe she couldn't afford to let him live, even under her influence."

"Wait," Natasha broke in. "She *betrayed* the Powers that Be?"

"Uh, yeah. She said — and as far as I've been able to work out, she was probably telling the truth this far — that she was one of the ancient Powers. That she was fed up with sitting back, passively watching, only doing the smallest amount possible to help the mortal creatures in all the worlds. That she had come here to show mankind the way to peace, happiness, brotherhood and love, and all that."

"Wow," Natasha muttered, clearly awed by all that. "I would have guessed she was really a moth'lar demon, myself."

I smiled at the thought. "Jasmine may have had her heart in the right place, and a big heart to boot, but that didn't make her any less dangerous. The path that she wanted to put humanity on..." I sighed, trying to find the best way to put it. "It wouldn't have been our own paradise, freely chosen, and that makes it hollow." Pause. "Plus the fact that she was eating people to sustain her earthly body and persuasive powers..."

"Eating people!!" Natasha exploded. "And you still believe that she wanted the best for us? Ranchers treat cattle pretty well, and keep them from fighting each other — but not for any altruistic reasons."

"She didn't need to take over the world just to have a safe food source," I replied. "Plus, if all we really were was meat to her, that would have come out once all of her plans were ruined. Creepy as it was, she *did* care. I think she even regretted the people eater part."

"Well, I don't tend to give the benefit of the doubt to any creature for whom I would fit on the menu...and no, you don't count because you don't drink human blood yourself."

"Stay clear of cows," I joked. "Think they might feel the same way."

"That's why I'm a vegan," she smirked. "Anyway, once we rescued Aaron, Groo and I pretty much turned ourselves around and headed back out of the Los Angeles area. Especially after I had heard about Jasmine's powers of persuasion increasing — I didn't want to put him at risk from either of us. Groo promised me that he'd protect the boy, even from me, and I hoped that as a part demon, he'd be immune to the effect."

"I'm not so sure," I put in. "I fell under her spell, for a while there — though my soul is human. But so did our friend Lorne, and he's one hundred percent pure dethwokk demon."

"Ahh. Just as well that we seemed to have been able to outrun her influence, then," Natasha mentioned. "Until one minute that must have been very near the end, Groo and I both went under — she must have gone global right then."

"With the worldwide news address, you mean?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. We didn't have a television on at the time, but that didn't seem to matter. Maybe drawing billions of people into unity gave her the power to find us and convert us. Fortunately, Aaron himself wasn't affected, and he was able to fend both of us off until Jasmine's power crashed, shortly afterwards." She smiled. "Should I thank you for that?"

"Not necessary."

"But I skipped to the end of the story there. We asked Aaron if he had any idea why the Jasmaniacs had targeted him, and he couldn't explain it. It was much later, when he mentioned that he'd been having problems in school, that things started to fit into place. His parents had taken him to specialists and put him on medication for schizophrenia."

"Schizo..." I made the connection. "Hearing voices."

"Yes. The way we worked it out, the doctor was converted by Jasmine, and she recognized the signs. The drugs were pretty effective at suppressing his link to the Powers That Be, but she thought that he represented a threat anyway."

She paused briefly, then continued. "Once the threat from Jasmine was over, we took Aaron back to his parents, and tried to explain that the voices were not a sign of mental illness, but a gift — a heavy gift to carry, and one that he had to learn how to deal with, but still something to be treasured rather than repressed. It took a long time and a lot of arguing, but they started to support his working with me after a few months, and he's come along amazingly since then."

I blinked. Somehow I had pictured Aaron wandering around with Natasha and Groo ever since then, not living with his parents and going to high school. "And he 'heard' a warning about us getting in trouble this morning, and you spent all day figuring out what they meant?" I repeated.

"Pretty much," she agreed. "And what to do about them... the signs were clear that to move too hastily might lead us to our own deaths. Tracking down where you were, trying to get enough understanding of what you might be doing and what might threaten you...and then we lost track of everybody amidst all the action around midnight...uhh, hello?"

I looked up and saw Doyle and Fred coming towards us — an unusual pairing, considering that they'd definitely never have had a chance to meet in life. But they had friends in common both here and in the beyond, and I guess that had been enough. "Hey, where's Cordy?" I asked, a little irrelevantly.

"She popped into the dome, to chat up *her* boyfriend," Fred giggled, nodding teasingly at Natasha.

"Ahh, right," I nodded. Clearly nothing romantic was likely to happen at the moment between Cordy and Groo, but they had a long and confusing history together, and this was a unique opportunity for each of them to get a little closure. "So, Fred...looks like you've been settling into the afterlife all right."

"Frankly, it's still more than a little confusing," she admitted. "Just like when I first arrived at UCLA or when you brought me back to Los Angeles after livin' in my cave in Pylea for so long. Big, and complicated, and not working according to any rules that I understand yet." She turned and smiled, and I realized that she was looking at Wesley, who was talking to Faith and Kennedy. "But so long as there's people who I know there and who love me, that's home."

"Then you're still home here, too," I whispered softly.

"Awww...that might be the nicest thing anybody ever said ta me in all mah born days," she drawled. "Though, come to think of it, I'm not sure if this really qualifies as one of my born days...do your born days end when you die?"

# IV

**Mattasee glided up to me silently**. "He's coming."

I smiled grimly. "Then it's showtime." Somewhat to my surprise, everyone up on the catwalks was already moving to their assigned places. What the...

*I've linked us all mentally*, Mattasee told me silently. *Helps with co-ordinaton in a situation like this.*

I blinked in surprise, then nodded approval at him. *Any idea who's with the sorcerer?* I tried to send back.

*No, I can't 'sense' anyone but him. But we'll find out soon enough.*

We did. The warehouse door was slid all the way open, and the Velerian Sorcerer's party headed in, unconcerned about anything but the dome and its contents.

I counted seven highly trained vampire warriors in his escort...not the ninjas we'd met earlier, but experts in a European swordsman's tradition...possibly the Order of Dessike. *So much the better for us...we've got plenty of experience in this party dealing with vampires of all sorts.* I couldn't tell if that was my own thought or from someone else in the link.

Moving on... Three humanoid demons — not trolls but possibly some variant of the Kyxxar genus — hobgoblin like, wiry and tough. Probably pretty smart fighters. Two lizard-heads, and...

*Who's the faded chick in the vinyl pumps?* the question came, from Kennedy I think.

I squatted down and peered underneath the handrail, trying to get a better look and confirm the face of Lilah Morgan. Don't worry — she's Executive Management. Won't get involved once the fighting starts.

My own attention was drawn to the figure who had to be the sorcerer himself, an impposing man wearing a long, black cape. At least he seemed like a man. From what I knew about the Velerian guild they didn't discriminate by species, so he might be *Homo Sapiens* or some variety of demon that looked much the same. (I didn't figure any Velerian for altering his appearance artificially.) Of course, he didn't come from our earth, but Wesley had told me that many dimensions had apparently evolved humans convergently.

I motioned the group to move aside slightly — and then realized that the motion was unnecessary — as soon as I'd made the decision they were following it. The sorcerer was approaching the dome, and... *NOW!!*

I leapt off the catwalk, sword in hand, and sliced the arm off of a lizardhead as I landed. Everything was happening at once. Projectiles were being shot by those who remained up on the catwalks — arrows from the bows of Mattasee and Faith, crossbow quarrels from Giles, seeking out the hearts of the vampires. Natasha was firing grenades at the demons. Meanwhile, the three other Slayers and I were down on the ground, mopping up the survivors. In bare seconds it was over — only the four of us, the sorcerer, and Lilah remained standing. Lilah was dumbstruck, stock still. Dana seemed to have been wounded. A lizard-head spear entry in her lower side was bleeding, but she was on her feet and backing carefully away from the action — and a hobgoblin and the lizard-head were lying dead where she had been.

Doyle appeared, about twenty feet away from the sorcerer, and concentrated. The talisman around his neck, an impressive pendant with intricate golden carvings and large red jewels, floated up slightly into the air, and then the chain slipped out from around his neck and over the sorcerer's head. It began to float towards Doyle — but only for an instant, because the sorcerer reached out and grabbed it. I moved closer as quickly as I could. The dome dropped, leaving Willow, Spike, Groo, and Illyria in plain sight, and the sorcerer gestured at Doyle, staggering him. The talisman now swung straight down from his hand.

I knew I'd only have one shot at this. My truesilver sword was still in my hand. and I slashed out vehemently, the mithril edge slicing through bone as easily as if it were made of hard butter. Most of the sorcerer's forearm fell to the floor, along with the hand and the talisman. Willow gestured, and the pendant flew swift and sure into her own grasp.

That was the most important step down — we had gotten the talisman away from him, without any damage to it. Now we just had to keep it. The rest of the group dropped down to join us, and we formed into a loose circle around the dangerous magician, densest in the direction where Willow hung back, still carrying his talisman.

All of a sudden, the sorcerer struck with magik. A field of black power streamed from him towards the ones that were blocking his way — Giles, Kennedy, Groo, Mattasee, Natasha. And a tiny edge of the spell caught Spike, draining the energy away from them. There would be only moments to keep that dread spell from claiming lives — I was to the side, and struck out again with my sword, but it simply bounced off of a force shield that was surrounding the sorcerer on all sides. Buffy and Faith, behind him, were having no better luck.

It was Illyria who took action, stepping into the edge of the energy field and right through the shield. (Whether she was immune to it as a demon, or whether it was only weapons that were blocked and not people I couldn't tell.) She put one of her hands on each of the sorcerer's shoulders and simply PULLED her arms apart. One of the sorcerer's arms and some of his rib cage tore away, and the magikal effects ceased almost immediately.

Suddenly remembering something, I turned to face Lilah, who instantly blinked away again. Well, no time to worry about her right now. I hurried over to join those who were attending to the wounded.

"They'll all recover," Willow said, "but not soon." She turned to face Buffy and myself, and I could see the worry for Giles and Kennedy in her face. "We can't waste the time getting them to an enchanted portal... I think I should teleport them back to the haven."

Buffy considered a moment. "How're you doing on power?"

"Not outstanding," she admitted, "but I've got reserves I haven't even touched, courtesy of the Devon girls. I'll be okay."

"It makes sense," Buffy agreed, and turned to me for confirmation.

I tried to weigh the alternatives quickly. "Yeah, that sound alri... The 'Devon girls'?"

"There's a powerful coven of witches in Devon that Giles and I have both worked with," Willow explained. "Since we weren't sure what we'd be facing here, they offered to imbue me with a magical 'booster' of energy in case my own reserves get low. I won't be able to maintain it as well as natural energy, but the extra might be a lifesaver."

I looked at our wounded sitting on the concrete. "If you think your own power levels are still high enough, then go ahead and send them.

"I should go too," Dana said, frowning at her wound. "Got stupid, and let myself be hurt."

"You were unlucky," Buffy said, "and you did your part well."

Dana accepted this with a nod and some motion of her hand that seemed almost like a salute. "Nice to see you again, Mister Angel."

I nodded back, smiling.

"Now, don't you go blipping me back to the penalty box, Red," Spike insisted, flexing his shoulder, which seemed a little stiff. "I got tagged by the edge of that, true, but 'm still in fighting condition, and I mean to be there at the end of this thing."

"All right, all right," Willow assured him. "One less body to move is fine by me." She concentrated, and the five wounded disappeared with an audible POP. Willow smiled. "They arrived safely."

"Then we should move quickly," Illyria pointed out, examining the talisman, and then handing it to me with a significant look. "Ms. Morgan may not know what we intend to do with this," she waved the talisman, which Willow must have handed her as she hurried over, "but it can hardly be of minor concern to her that we have schemed toward, and succeeded in, winning such a rare and valuable artifact. She may well increase the number and strength of her forces protecting the gate."

"There's a lot more activity out there than when I put up the dome," Willow said, frowning in the direction of the warehouse door, though there wasn't anything much to see there... but she was probably reacting to a more witchly sense altogether.

"Well, they're not going to go away now," I said, agreeing with Illyria. I spent just a second to look over the team... Buffy, Faith, and Willow — Spike and Illyria. And myself. Aside from the ghosts (who weren't that much help when it came to melee,) it was down to the six of us. I'd have much preferred to have had Kennedy and Groo along — and even Rupert Giles and some of the others were good for watching your back. But that wasn't the way it had played out — and there was a certain poetic resonance to the final roster. Each of us had played a unique and pivotal role in the events of the past seven years or so that had led to this moment. Some of us had so much history together, and some were virtually strangers, but...

"Let's move out," I announced. This was no time to get lost in nostalgia.

"Well, that's a fine sentiment," Spike piped up. "But move *how* exactly? As I make it, we're more than eight miles away from your Hyperion hotel — and there's a horde of demons filling the streets between here and there, and beyond, just looking for us so that they can kill us all flat. Do we really plan to travel on foot the whole way? Because I'm always up for a good fight, but that sounds more like a way to get squashed."

I grimaced. That was something that I hadn't thought of. I'd been so busy worrying about how we were going to get the best of the Velerian that I hadn't even been paying attention to where this warehouse was — though if Spike said it was yea far away from our final target, he was probably right, or fairly close at least.

"Sounds like a job for me again," Willow said with a wan smile.

"You sure, Will?" Buffy asked her nervously.

"Spike's got a point," Willow said. "Rapid, safe travel towards the hotel is pretty much required. Therefore, it's an efficient use of resources." She frowned, concentrating. "The portal will mess up any attempt to materialize too close, though. Orbing is probably our best bet, though even that won't..." Something made her start giggling. "Yeah, that'll do as well as anything! Okay, everybody corporeal link hands," she instructed. "You ghosts can follow your own way, right?"

"I think so, yes," Wesley agreed as a rough circle formed. Illyria took Willow's right hand, and was followed by Spike, myself, Faith, and Buffy, who linked back up to Willow, completing the chain.

"Take a deep breath," Willow advised, and there was only enough time to do so before her magic took hold. (I'll take a moment to clean up one misunderstanding here. Vampires can and do breathe, though we have no need of oxygen and are unaffected by many types of gas, smoke, etcetera. We sometimes even need to breathe in order to shout or yell, though the vampire adaptation seems to have a strange effect on the voice box allowing its use without air passage through the throat in some circmstances. Can't get much volume that way though. Okay, done talking about that.)

The orb transportation was weird — at first it seemed as if the world around us had broken apart and was swirling into chaos, and then I was sure that it was the reverse, that I had broken into tiny little bits of matter and energy that were streaming through the city. Before it was done, I was convinced that location was meaningless, that 'here' and 'there' were only states of mind and that the entire universe would fit comfortably inside a single grain of sand, if you just knew how to pack it right.

When I was pretty confident that I had achieved the 'there' state of mind, we were standing on what looked like the second floor of a half-completed building, looking out at the sea of monsters below because there wasn't a wall there yet. "Everybody on board," Willow said.

"On board what?" Illyria asked, taking the words out of my mouth. I looked, and realized that Willow had stepped onto a huge wooden board, roughly triangular in shape and symmetric. About fifteen feet long from tip to end and nine feet wide at the base, it was big enough for all seven of us to stand on at the same time all right, but...

"On board?" I repeated. "Is this thing going to be moving?"

"With the help of a little witchcraft, you'd better believe it's gonna move," Buffy assured us. "Good idea, Willow."

I looked out at the demons once again. "If we're going to be flying on this thing, those guys are going to try to jump on board or do whatever else they can to stop us or bring us down."

"Then it's our job to make sure that that doesn't happen," Faith pointed out, grabbing a large axe from a pile of weapons conveniently nearby — had Willow arranged that too? "Who gets to ride in the point?"

"You guys fight over it," Buffy said. "I'll take back right" And she suited action to word, moving into position where she could defend Willow's flank. I looked at Spike, hesitating, and lost out as he strode over to mount at the Apex.

I got on in the middle of the right side, behind Spike, beside Faith, and in front of Willow and Buffy, with Illyria at the far left side. "No matter what, protect Willow," Faith advised us out loud. "If she can't concentrate totally on keeping us airborne, things will get bad in a hurry."

With that word of warning ringing in my head, the flying board seemed to launch itself out of the building and cruise down the street, twenty feet above the asphalt. Immediately there were trolls and other demons jumping at the 'ship' from building rooftops... Whoever was nearest just kind of knocked them aside or killed them by the quickest way possible. The close quarters forced an odd kind of formation fighting on us: Faith was close enough to touch and Spike, Willow, and Buffy were all within a few paces of me.

At one point, a shadow knight materialzed right between Spike and me, and it was a hell of a fight to get rid of him in time. Faith fook a nasty cut to her thigh in the process (which she bandaged with part of her shirt, of course, and did her best to shake off), and I got a pretty bad crack on the head as well.

Nobody noticed that an assassin had managed to jump at us from the rear until she had tagged Willow on the back of the leg. Nothing too serious as woulds went, but soon we realized that the pain was enough to distract her attention and keep her from maintaining flight control. We wobbled and dipped a bit, and then began to sail closer and closer to the ground. Buffy raced over to brace Willow against the sudden forward impact, and the rest of us just kinda rolled with it. I rushed over to Faith once the crash was over and checked to see if she was all right.

"Where are we, how close?" Spike asked. "I wasn't quite sure where we started."

"We have about seven blocks yet to travel," Illyria put in. I guess, being the uber-demon chick, she had a great sense of direction and spacial relations too. "But the horde is thick here, and the going will be difficult as soon as they — "

"Spot us," I finished, just as an assorted pack of bogeys came around the corner, let out a truly astonishing chorus of squeals and howls, and attacked. It was deadly and furious. I ended up trying to duke it out against a pair of rakers, (some of the deadliest creatures I've ever been up against), as the chaotic melee fell down upon us.

I had just critically wounded one of the fiends with the sword and frightened the other off for a few seconds when I saw it. Buffy had been keeping a gawky humanoid with shaggy violet hair busy while Willow snuck up behind him. Snarling, the friendly (or so I usually thought of her) witch grabbed this guy by one shoulder and plunged her other hand, it seemed, into his chest, sucking dark blue ether out.

Laughing wildly, Willow pushed him aside, and a burst of force emanating from her knocked all the remaning bad guys in the vicinity over, without affecting any of us. She looked around and flushed slightly. "Whoops, didn't even mean to do that," she muttered. She waved one hand in the air and chanted solemnly for about ten seconds.

"What was that one for?" Faith asked, a little wary of this whole business.

"I've set up decoys and a cloaking spell," Willow replied. "Come on, neither will last for long." And she led the way off towards the hotel.

Cordelia popped in just as we were leaving, looked around at what was left of the fight, and growled. "Not here. Dammit!!"

"Um, Willow," I called, running after her. "One little thing about that cloaking spell... Is there any way you can help the ghosts find us without the horde doing the same?"

* * *

Our count of ground to cover before reaching the hotel dropped down to something between two and one point six miles, but that was definitely the good news. A few enemy fiends attacked us — presumably those with the ability to see through cloaking magic. Apparently with the decoys they hadn't been able to set up an effective hue and cry for us. However, after a little of that, apparently Lilah or whoever was in charge, had pulled most of the minions out of the area and begun opposing us with magic, which was doing a little better.

"OWWWW!!" I clapped one hand to the tender side of my head and instinctively backed away. Then I shot a look at the nearest person, who happened to be Buffy, in search of sympathy. None at all.

"Serves you right for being careless," she muttered instead, and crept cautiously forward to investigate the magical phenomenon that had so cruelly injured me.

Well, first of all, it wasn't my fault. Some illusionist working for Wolfram and Hart filled the whole area with phantasms and mirages (fighting back since Willow had started it, maybe), and I was well and truly sick of stabbing my sword into things that weren't really there, just tricks played on our perception. So when a wall of flying short swords suddenly appeared, barring our path, I continued on as if they hadn't been there — and paid the price because they were real. One blade sliced pretty deeply into my cranium and cracked skull — one of those hazards that would be deadly if I weren't a vampire.

Faith shot a look over at Willow. "Power check?"

Willow sighed and frowned. "I'm starting to get low. Still got the booster, but that'll be most effective right when I first draw on it, and we still haven't gotten to the last line of defense, which is likely to be..."

"Got it," I muttered. "Well, there has to be another way past. We could, umm, well..." I stalled, feeling everyone looking at me.

Spike laughed out loud. "How about *this*?" He dashed forward, but carefully, and reached out to grab one weapon by the hilt. It struggled against his grip with whatever magical force that had let it dance in the air unsupported, but Spike was stronger and wrestled it around. Grinning nastily, he hit one of the other swords several times hard with 'his' blade, and then let it go again.

I watched, curious. The first sword quickly resumed its place in the whirling, flashing deadly pattern. The one that had been hit did not, however. It broke formation to counterattack the first sword, and in the resulting bitter duel other swords were hit by accident, and each of these joined the action. Soon there was a full-scale brawl of magically floating weapons taking place. Spike, Buffy and I each backed away slightly to avoid getting accidentally slashed ourselves.

"Very interesting, but where did that get us?" I pointed out. It would be even harder now to cross the swords without getting badly wounded.

"Just wait," Spike whispered, intent on the battle royale. "Little trick I picked up from Jasper St. Clair." I stood there and watched, fuming a little at Spike's miniature ego trip. Even though he said he wanted to be a good guy now, he kept bragging about having run with the baddest vampires ever. I knew Jasper by reputation, a cruel vampire swordsman and wannabe sorceror -- he was actually a vague relative by the rules of vampire genesalogy: another grandchilder of my sire Darla, along a different branch.

Suddenly I realized it. A number of the swords were moving with less energy and animation than before. Either going for the kill, outside of a defensive pattern, or getting hit by other enchanted swords was reducing their stamina. As we watched, each blade was reduced to flopping around on the asphalt like hooked fishes.

"Wow," Buffy breathed. "That's actually... How did you do that, Spike?"

"It's just something they put into these barriers," he muttered in full 'Cool Spike' mode, "and the people who know how can shut them down. Doesn't always work, but I thought it was worth having a go."

"Yeah, not bloody bad," Faith quipped, starting out over the strewn weapons...and stomping on one that feebly lifted blade to try and slash at her ankles. "Onward!"

"Yeah, enough talking, let's push it," Buffy agreed, following and breaking into a jog as she cleared the field of swords. I understood what she meant. Every second we wasted at this point made less ground that we would gain before the bad guys could cook up another nasty delaying tactic. But I let Spike, Illyria and Faith run on ahead, falling in beside Willow, who seemed to be having just a little difficulty keeping the pace. "You all right?" I asked softly.

"I'll be fine," she insisted. "Was never that much for running, even back in gym class, but I think," *puff*, "I can keep from holding everybody else up. Know that's the last thing you need."

"Okay," I agreed, staying abreast of her, and smiling a little. We crossed an intersection together, moving into the final stretch.

Suddenly there was a faint voice in my mind: Willow was using a simple telepathy spell, to avoid having to waste breath that she needed for jogging to talk with it. *Why are you staying back here?*

As a vampire, I didn't have anything better to do with my breath than talk, no matter how hard I was running. "Well, umm, didn't want to leave you bringing up the rear alone. In case of a suprise attack

from behind us. I know that you're quite capable of defending yourself, but you can save your mojo for something else if I fight off the demons the old fashioned way.

*Oh, okay. Yeah, that makes sense,* I sent. She smiled at me, and suddenly a hail from a little further on caught my attention. The rest of our team was holding position about ninety feet away from the hotel entrance, and Willow and I caught up to them in a mere moment. The gates were guarded by seven warrior demons, each of them maybe nineteen feet tall and carrying weapons that pulsed with pure black energy.

I looked around. "Okay, we ready for this?" Spike and Faith nodded.

"No time like the present," Buffy muttered, fidgeting her right hand as if her fingers were itching.

"Then..." I started, and was interrupted. It happened too fast for any of us to process, just a sweep of darkness passing through the circle we had made, and leaving holes after it left. I saw Spike shaking his head, trying to reorient, and noticed that damn dragon was flying away, gaining elevation, and holding what might be human-sized figures in each of its front claws. Willow and Illyria were nowhere to be seen, unless you counted those vague shapes.

"Oh, come ON!!!" Faith breathed. We watched for any immediate indication that the dragon had snatched up more than it could easily hold. Surely at least ONE of them would be able to quickly break free? Unless they were quite badly wounded...

"Damn it to hell," Spike growled. "Now we've gotta go fight the dragon to get them back. They're the keys to our whole plan, after all!"

# V

**We all just stood there and stared for a moment.** "This...this wasn't just some random snatch," Faith said slowly. "Stinks of a planned abduction by the bad guys. As, well, as undoubtedly kick-ass as each of the four of us are in a regular scrap-out, none of us exactly has the kind of extra-super powers that would come in handy chasing after a dragon with just about no time left."

"I agree," I said slowly. "And that's probably why neither Willow nor Illyria were able to break free right away. Maybe they were targeted with some kind of extra magic, and the dragon was just sent to make sure that we wouldn't be able to help either of them right away." I growled deep in my throat. "They took Illyria because they suspected she was important to whatever we were going to the hotel for, and Willow to keep her from using magic to save her quickly. Or something like that."

"Or maybe they thought Willow was the key one; it doesn't really matter," Buffy pointed out. "The thing is, now we need to figure out a... *Hey!!"* Fred had just appeared with us.

"Oh, hi, glad I found you. It's still not easy to track anybody this close to the dimensional instability," she said in greeting. "Ummm..."

"Did you see what happened?" I asked immediately.

"Not exactly, but close enough," she said. "Cordy is doing her best to follow the dragon -- I was with her for a bit there. Willow is unconscious and looks hurt, but not critical. Illyria is encased in some sort of stasis bubble. Cordelia's gonna find out what it does with them and report back. Wesley's popped

back to the wizard's school to confer with Virginia. We thought you might need a bit of extra help with this one...no offence."

"None taken, luv," Spike muttered. "So, we just wait here and see what they have to say?"

"Maybe fall back a bit," Buffy suggested, pointing to the demons still guarding the Hyperion gate, which seemed to be noticing something in our direction.

"Yeah, they'll be able to orient on me..." Fred mentioned, "just don't move quickly, because I can't 'scroll' very fast right here. Oh, hey Doyle, what's the word?"

"Things getting more dire," Doyle reported unhappily. "The horde is causing more and more damage, all across the city. Death count's gotta be, well, there's no way to be sure exactly." He shook his head, frowning. "I know you don't like to hear this, boss, but..."

"No, it's okay." I assured him. "Doesn't help to sugarcoat the ugly truth... Oh, dammit!! Like we didn't have enough bad news!"

Several of the others were surprised at this exclamation from me, until they realized that Lilah had just appeared a few feet away. "What the hell do *you* want?"

Lilah smirked her usual 'in charge and loving it' smile. "Just wanted to let you know that my offer is still on the table, for about five more minutes. You agree to help us find the sword of Bosh Ma-ahd, and all of this goes away. We'll let your friends go and everything. It's a good offer, Angelcakes." She grinned and laughed softly after delivering the faux endearment.

I gritted my teeth. "I think I should probably 'let you know' that right this second would be a good time to blip out...and stay well away from us!"

She laughed out loud. "Or what? You can't hurt a dead woman, Angel, I mean literally in this case. It's fun hanging close to you, and this way I get to eavesdrop on whatever you're planning. Got a way to stop me?"

"Um, I think I do," a new voice announced. Cordelia strode towards Lilah, her right hand held out in front of her, and glowing with a fierce white radiance, like she had glowed several years ago when she was still alive. Lilah flinched at the light and tried to back away, but she couldn't move as quickly as Cordelia could advance on her, and just before my girl (metaphorical possessive there) was close enough to touch her, Lilah blinked out.

"Um, thanks," Spike pointed out. "Not sure you needed to go to such extremes just to take brow-boy here at his word..."

"No, Angel was right," Cordelia said, the glow fading almost instantly. "We need to be able to plan without getting overheard. Okay, the dragon seems to have a lair not too far from here, and it's dropped Willow and Illyria there. In what used to be the upper floors of a ruined apartment tower. The bad news is that the superstructure has collapsed enough that the stairways are completely blocked and of course the elevator is ruined. You could try climbing up what's left of the outside of the building..."

"But then we'd be exposed, and at a disadvantage if Draco boy tries to attack us from the air."

"Yeah," Cordelia nodded somberly. "I'm hoping that Wesley's idea is paying off, because things look more than a little dire otherwise. Ohh, speak of the Rogue Demon Hunter..." Exactly how she knew that he was coming several seconds before Wesley popped in I'm not sure, but, well, pop in he did. "What's the word?"

"I think I have an option," he said gruffly. "It's a good thing that Virginia had the items available, and that she was willing to put them to use on our behalf."

"What items?" Spike demanded suspiciously. "I told you, Percy, I'm not wearing no enchanted gizmos; no necklaces or bracelets or any of that..."

"Oh, do shut up Spike," Wesley snapped. "It was funny before, but that chorus is now quite past the point. If bearing a magical talisman is the only way to survive and complete the mission, then you *will* put it on. Come on, we need to get to the portal quickly."

*"Portal?"* Buffy asked, as Wesley led the way, not by walking or drifting slowly, but jumping with a pop about forty feet away and waving for those of us on foot to catch up.

"It would take a bit to explain that," I muttered lamely, as we sprinted off, mostly away from the hotel, but that was probably for the best at the moment. It wasn't long before we arrived at another blank wooden portal, this one mystically dead in a way that I could somehow tell.

"Count off the four corners, and then mark these runes upon it," Wesley told me, making the magical letters appear glowing in midair near his hand. I recognized the first step from the more detailed instructions that Virginia had given me earlier, but wasn't quite sure about the glyphs until after I had finished writing them with a scrap of chalk onto the door... Then I guessed that they might be part of an incantation to activate the portal for receiving, instead of sending us somewhere else.

Sure enough, after only seconds, a small pile of long thin objects appeared with a soft BANG, and the glyphs disappeared from the doorframe slowly after. Some of the deliveries were fairly typical looking weapons, but... I picked one of the other items up. It looked like a long, thin strip of leather, embellished with ward carvings, tiny jewel studs, and gold plating. "Umm, what the heck do we..." I turned and stared at Wesley. "You've gotta be kidding me."

"Not really," he said, shaking his head. "Belts of Ammana-lohr. I realize that you may feel slightly foolish putting them on, but they will endow each of the four of you with flight, the ability to shoot power bolts, and other abilities that will serve you quite in good stead against the fire-wyrm. The weaponry is all enchanted, blessed, or composed of mystical metal — the better for attacking a dragon with."

"Umm," Fred cleared her throat softly while the four of us started looking at the belts, and the enchanted weapons. "I've heard of these belts before, Wesley, and they're a channel for metaphysical power, not a source or battery for it. We don't have any reservoir for them to draw on; it would require..." she trailed off. "Ohh, are you thinking of..."

"Yes, I was just getting to that point," Wesley mumbled a little sheepishly. "As bona fide spirits from the great beyond, each of the four of us intrinsically represent mystical forces, and our resonance with the ether can be used to sustain the, um, the artifacts. We will, however, need to temporarily bond, each of us four ghosts with one of you, for the time that you're using the belts. It might be an unusual experience, er, for all of us, but there seems to be little other ch--" Now incredibly embarrassed, Wesley changed the subject by seizing on a triviality. "And the four Lohr belts are not interchangeable; this one, for instance," he indicated the belt that Spike was holding, "is Calyx, embodying the iconic force of water, and would better be worn by one of the, um, the Slayers. Probably Buffy."

I decided to try cutting through the confusion. "Maybe you should direct us all on who should wear which belt — and you're doing this, Spike no argument." I turned back to Wesley. "Each of us has to pick one of you ghosts to team up with?"

He nodded.

"Um, Doyle, how about it, man?" I knew that Doyle would be very uncomfortable 'joining' with any of the others. He didn't know Buffy or Faith at all really, and the one time he'd met Spike while alive Spike had tried to kill him, not that that put Doyle into a very exclusive group or anything.

"Be happy to," Doyle said.

"Actually, I'm over my objection," Spike muttered softly, at almost the same time. "Always kinda wanted to be able to fly on my own, or nearly... This one?"

Wesley nodded at him.

"All right." Spike buckled one of the belts around his waist.

"Umm... How about you and me, Cordy?" Buffy said a little tentatively, and I knew it was a little like falling on a grenade for her. She and Cordelia had never gotten along really well, but she had to know that Faith disliked Cordelia and Cordelia disliked Spike. Cordy nodded, a little uncertain herself.

"So what, I'm stuck with tutor girl?" Faith asked, although I saw a bit of a glint in her eye; she and Fred had gotten along pretty well when Faith had been working to stop the Beast and my evil other half.

"The hell you are," Spike put in, and I laughed. Fred had always been *his* favorite. "It doesn't have to be boys with boys and girls with girls, does it?"

"Um, no I don't think so," Wesley said, a little surprised by the notion. "Might be slightly odd for us, since we'll be aware of your bodies in the same way you are. Don't think it'll work the same way, since we ghosts don't exactly have bodies anymore." He shrugged and looked at Faith. "One more joint venture?"

"Yeah, might as well," Faith said, shaking her head. "You kinda owe me one, after all."

The four of us had all put the belts on by this point. "Okay, now how does it work?" I asked nervously.

"Kind of like this," Doyle said, and all of a sudden I was aware of several things, of Doyle's Irish laugh in the back of my mind, and the belt around my waist pulsing with metaphysical power. It only took the briefest effort to think of it — and I shot up into the sky, hovering about twelve feet above the others.

"Come on, we don't have any time to lose!!" I called. The rest of the ghosts blinked out (or was that blinked *in?* ) one at a time, and soon the belt squad was airborne. They had all re-armed themselves from Wesley's gear as well, Buffy carrying a long spear, Spike a heavy war axe, and Faith had a two-handed broadsword scabbarded on her back, along with possibly smaller items that any of them might have hidden. I hadn't taken any new weaponry myself...the mithril sword would do just fine for dragon fighting, and I was quite used to it by now.

"I'll lead the way," Buffy called, suiting flight to word, except that her words sounded halfway more like Cordelia's than Buffy's own.

As we flew along, there was a crack that sounded like lightning, and a soft rumble as part of an already leveled building collapsed into further rubble. I looked around, confused, and saw Faith looking with annoyance at Spike. "What?" he replied with the usual insoucience. "Had to try out this power bolt thing beforehand to see how it worked. What's the other power or powers we get, Percy?"

Faith shook her head in a gesture of annoyance that did seem very characteristic of Wesley, though it was harder to recognize with her. "Only one extra ability, and it's different for each of you, er us, based on the belts. Buffy has a curative talent, which means that she should go and make sure that Willow is all right as soon as an opportunity presents itself. Angel, as the bearer of the earth Lohr, has the bond breaker at his disposal, which hopefully will be able to free Illyria from confinement, as well as possibly get the rest of us out of any tight spots we might blunder into during melee with the dragon."

*"And?"*

"We have the fire Lohr, providing a flame shield which should be a quite useful defense against a dragon's most notorious attack mode."

There was a pause there, during which Spike seemed to be trying to work it out for himself. "Okay, Water, earth, fire... Wind! Okay, I've got wind Lohr, right? What does that give me, then?"

Faith cleared her voice. "Umm, neither Virginia nor 'my' research was able to determine the specific ability for the wind Lohr. But I imagine that the two of you will be able to figure it out in short order. Just be careful not to hurt any of the rest of us while you're experimenting!"

Spike considered that. "Will do. Oh, and Faith, don't get too attached to ol' Wes. Illyria still needs his help, remember." He smirked a little as if that was a witty comeback.

Buffy turned back to roll her eyes at both of them, slowly coasting to a stop. "Okay, you guys. Once we round this corner, we'll be in sight of the dragon's lair, and probably the dragon. Anybody got a suggestion as far as strategy goes?"

"Well, starting with the simplest possible," Spike said slowly, "how about a direct assault? Keep at it, with any form of attack that seems to be hurting it, including our hand weapons and energy bolts, until someone can score a killing blow?"

"That sounds a little risky, even with our power-ups," I decided. "Wouldn't hurt to have Illyria's raw strength on our side — and she can probably jump far enough to stay in combat even with a flying dragon. I think I should try to get past the dragon, into the lair, as soon as possible, and use this 'bond breaker' to set Illyria free."

"Okay," Faith nodded. "Spike and I will cover you as best we can. Buffy, what about you?"

Buffy paused a moment, then let a fierce grin come onto her face as she hovered. "Yeah, if you're going in, Angel, then I'll back you up. Make sure that Willow's okay, though I don't think I want her helping us out with this unless we have no other choice — she has to conserve her power."

"All right," Spike said, and we arranged ourselves silently into a new formation, Faith in the lead, and Spike flanking her closely on the left. I flew a little further behind Faith, and to the right, and Buffy brought up the rear. We passed around the edge of the building and saw the ruined apartment tower that Cordelia had mentioned, and the large dragon, flying near the top of it, apparently waiting for us. Though I'm not sure it was quite expecting us to be flying... If a dragon can show an expression of surprise, then this one very nearly did a double take.

"Let's try a simultaneous blast," Spike suggested, and after a moment of non-verbal consensus, I lifted up my hand and focused the energy from the belt. Four streaks of slightly different colored energy rocketed into the head and neck of the huge reptile...and though the thing snarled in frustration, it didn't seem to be too badly hurt. I had been afraid of that. Dragons are really tough, resistant to most forms of attack. These 'energy bolts'...they might be useful in finishing the fight, but to get that far we'd need to soften it up a lot with other methods of combat.

"Okay, let me try this," I said, and drifted toward the dragon, then broke into a headlong dive, blade first, There was what looked like a small weak point in the scales, a mere crack, in one of the beast's foreclaws, where the roots of two talons met. I slashed at it, and the silvery blade dug in deep. "All right, now careful..." Twist the blade, slash sideways and out...and the sword came free, pulling a chunk of dragon scale as big as a shield out by its roots. The dragon howled in pain, and I flew back as quickly as I could. It bashed at me with the wounded claw, and hit me, but the impact was light because it didn't have any leverage and I was already moving back away from the attack, rolling with the punch — or maybe flying with the bash. The dragon seemed to think about that, and tried to grab me between both claws, but I was long gone. Still, the fact that it learned so quickly was disquieting — we wouldn't be able to fool it with that tactic again.

And then the dragon screamed again, much louder. I spun full around to see what was happening, and saw Spike hovering beneath the dragon's underbelly, dodging a spray of hot, steaming blood and looking for another place to strike. While I had been distracting the best with a relatively small strike, Billy Idol had been going for the high stakes. It figured...and probably he had the right idea. The dragon was trying to dive down on Spike and bite him or catch him between its forelegs, but Faith made a big show of trying to get into attack position at the side of the wyrm, just behind the shoulder where its foreleg connected up — another notorious weak spot — and with that distraction, Spike was able to zip off and Faith backed away too. The dragon now seemed to be quite incredibly pissed off and wore an expression like, *Just what the unholy hell do you flying knights think you're accomplishing?*

I shared a mischievous glance with the others, and we started to move as if by unspoken agreement. The sensation was quietly exhilarating... I had fought co-operatively with each of these people one at a time, (as well as fighting *against* each of them at one time or another), but never with even two of them together as a team before this mission, and certainly never while airborne. Did the fact that we were all wearing the Lohr belts help with the teamwork factor? Or was it the fact that we were all possessed by ghosts at the moment? In any event, Buffy and I drifted towards the mouth of the dragon's lair, close enough to back each other up but not to be attacked together, neither of us taking our attention off of the dragon itself. Faith and Spike flew in the other direction, ready to attack at the dragon's tender spots if it should focus on either of us.

Suddenly the dragon launched itself into action, coming straight for me, smoke curling from the tips of its nose and mouth. Doyle's presence in the back of my mind whispered calm, and I felt myself rise ever so slowly into the air. The dragon snarled viciously, stretching out a claw, apparently so that it could swipe at Buffy in passing, and two seconds after what I would have thought was the last possible moment of evasive action, Doyle switched off the flight spell. I dropped through the sky kinda like a big panicky stone, but the tactic definitely got me out of the path of the flames the dragon snorted, and beyond range of any bite attack. After falling about forty feet, Doyle let me turn the flying engine back on, and several seconds later we stabilized far below the action.

I had a pretty good view from down there actually, as the dragon, surprised by my sudden plummet, tried to slash at Buffy, catching her on the arm a bit but getting a good poke in the claw for its trouble. Spike got lashed by its tail as he tried to sneak up behind the beast, but it didn't seem terribly bad, and Faith got a good slash in at one of the rear legs.

*Thanks, man,* I said to Doyle internally. *Nice tactic.*

*Happy to help any way I can,* he assured me. *Mystical vibes, dragon evasion tactics -- I've got it all.*

I laughed at that. *It's weird to think of you being inside me like this. What's it like for you?*

*A little bit as if I were alive again...and the hero of the story. Which means we'd better get back to the good fight, huh?*

Buffy met me on my way back up, and we surveyed the situation. The dragon had passed the lair entrance on that strafing run, but it was turning around for another try. "Whatcha think?" she asked softly.

"Not bad, but not too good," I decided. "Nobody tries to sneak up on it from behind without figuring out a way to avoid that tail."

"Yeah," Buffy agreed, turning around in midair to survey the dragon in mid-motion. "Helluva wicked range of motion it's got with that thing."

I nodded soberly.

"Okay," Spike muttered as he flew up to meet us, shaking out his slightly battered limbs. "I've been thinking about this." For the first time, I could hear Fred's speech pattern coming from him. "I know you want to go and make sure that Willow is okay as soon as possible, Buffy, but I'm not sure that's a good idea right now. There's a whole lot of difference between the two of us working together to fend off the dragon and keep it from going back into its lair, and having *three* of us to fight against it. And there's plenty of reason for Angel to be the first one to go in. Illyria's help here could mean a world of difference, much as I hate to admit it." That last sentence sounded like Spike speaking for himself, not Fred.

"Yeah, I see your point," Buffy agreed reluctantly. "Wills should be okay for a little while longer, but if I leave you two out here with the dragon alone, one of *you* might get hurt."

"And that's another point," Faith put in. "If we do get tagged and you're here, you can use the healing mojo on us, or on yourself, right? As long as Cordy isn't about to run out of metaphysical juice."

"I'm not sure I want to try going in myself just yet anyway," I mentioned. "Let's see if we can do some damage with all four of us working together."

"Okay," Spike said, nodding. "Well, it's finished turning around. Any ideas for a good tactic?"

I thought furiously. "It's not used to this any more than we are. It may have fought people on the ground, but never flying through the air."

"Hmm...maybe other dragons," Faith put in.

"Still not really the same thing. Uhh... Faith, are you okay with being the decoy out front? You've got the heat shield, but it's still dangerous. It'll probably try to bite you or catch you in its claws when it realizes that toasting you doesn't work."

"Let it try," Faith insisted, hefting her sword meaningfully.

"Okay... Spike, you go from below again, Buffy from above, and I'll try to approach by the side. And... And I guess we'll see what it does!"

We split up into formation, and quickly it became clear why sometimes time spent coming up with intricate plans is wasted — the dragon simply refused to orient on Faith. For some reason, it was determined to make a strafing run on Buffy. She tried to fall back just a little and let Faith attract its attention without moving too far out of position, but it seemed to me that that just wasn't going to work. "Just go float behind Faith," I called to her. "You'll see enough action soon." With more than a little ill grace, Buffy zipped along to do that. The dragon just kept on going for her, hardly seeming to notice that someone else was in the way now.

It blasted out a big snort of blazing fire right on cue though... not sure if it was trying to roast Faith in passing, or aiming at Buffy behind her or what... but the fire and heat splashed away from Faith, and even the flames that were well to the side didn't pass her... that fire shield on her belt was big and tight, which was good to know. And the dragon was so surprised to see its fire bouncing that it didn't so

much as flinch away as I came swooping in and slashed viciously at the thin scaled behind its front leg. It flinched good and hard afterward though.

I never saw the dragon's arm snap back and pin me, for a long moment, against the rough, scaly skin, further back from where I'd made my incision. When I came back to my senses, I was once again falling through the air, and had to concentrate hard to stabilize before slamming hard into a streetlamp. *This is getting to be a bad habit, man,* Doyle deadpanned inside my head.

On my way back, I suddenly realized that I had an opening to slink into the lair and try to use the bond breaker on Illyria. The dragon was still chasing Buffy, with Faith and Spike doing their best to harry and wound it as much as possible without being hurt badly themselves. And all of them were well away from the lair entrance.

As I made my way quietly towards the ruined building, I kept a close eye on the action, and blinked in surprise when I saw a tornado funnel materialize about the dragon's tail, pulling it from side to side and off its course. And then came Spike's voice yelling "Wind Lohr kicks ASS!! *Whooo!* Tornado power!" And then the dragon's claw clenched around his legs, and Faith had to dash over and help him hack his way free.

Once into the mouth of the lair entrance, things quickly got dark and very strange looking...rooms and corridors of the apartment building had been smashed together and opened up at odd angles. Suddenly, as I rounded a twisting passageway, there was a soft, blue light, outlining a largish cavern. The source of the light was a glowing ellipsoidal bubble, about six feet long and a little over two feet in cross section, which had to be the stasis container that Cordelia had mentioned. The thing that I had to free Illyria from.

First, I looked for Willow, and found her crumpled into a heap nearby. She was badly hurt, yes, but stable, and I breathed a sigh of relief at that. I wasn't about to move her yet, but Buffy would need a light source when she came in after her. That was something that none of us had thought of.

I turned back to the light, focusing on the confining bubble, and frowned. *Okay Doyle, any idea how to do this bond-breaker thing?*

*Not really,* his voice replied. *Should be as simple as concentrating, like the flying and the power blast.*

I thought about that for a second, and then pointed at the bubble, visualizing the magic substance evaporating away and disappearing. Nothing. Well, maybe that wasn't quite the right concentration pattern... It was supposed to be a *breaker*, right? I tried again with a slightly more impressive imaginary fate for the stasis field, rupturing it into many tiny pieces that flew a short way before fading out, leaving the lair in deep darkness.

For a few seconds I just stood there, feeling stupid. I hadn't realized that the twisting passageway of the dragon's entrance absorbed quite so much of the light here. My eyes are very good, like those of most vampires, but really intense darkness can still blind us, and this qualified; or at least I was about as good as blind. There were a few patches of not-quite-as-black around, but I wasn't even sure what they meant.

"Angel? Angel, what is your condition? Where am I? What has happened to the others?" It was Illyria's voice, and that meant she could see well enough to recognize me, or distinguish my breathing or smell or something. Well, Illyria could do just about anything, so it kinda figured that — "

"You and Willow were attacked by hostile magic and carried off by the dragon," I told her. "Spike, Buffy and Faith are fighting the dragon now. I'm fine, just a little disoriented. Your stasis bubble was the only light source in here and now it's gone. Can you see at all?"

"Yes, I am generating my own light source...it must be a variety that your eyes do not detect." There was a short pause. "Is that any better?" An eerie violet radiance appeared for a second, outlining a feminine, muscular, armored figure, and then there was a bluish pop and it faded out. "I don't believe I can generate a light source for you. Extend your left arm and I shall lead you out."

I thought about that. The tunnel floor had been rough and would be hard going if I tried to walk it blind except for Illyria's help — and we both needed to get out as soon as possible. "No, I think I have a

better way." I floated up several feet in the air. "I have a good sense of spatial mapping, so if you just tell me which direction I need to fly in, I think we can make better time this way."

A pause. "Very well. Rotate two point three radians to the right, and bear up point four radians."

"Um, okay, but for future reference degrees would be better. And yards, if you have to give any distance measurements please."

She was able to give me directions without me crashing into any walls, and after we'd navigated a few twists my own night vision was back in service and I was able to tell her I didn't need the instructions any more.

We got back to the lair entrance at about the same time and looked out, trying to figure out as much as we could about the state of the fight. Apparently, somehow the dragon had been distracted from Buffy, because now it was Spike who was zipping along ahead of it. (There would be someone who had to lead the dragon in most of the possible battle formations we could come up with, I supposed, because the dragon's own instinct was to chase and destroy a single opponent with a head-on assault, and none of us were really strong enough to withstand such an attack.) He seemed pretty burned and battered — probably Buffy couldn't get to him and heal him without both of them getting flamed. Faith was trying to cut some tears in one of its wings, while Buffy was floating above it and trying to stab her spear into its back, probably aiming for a weak spot in the scales where the tail emerged.

"Try to lead it past here," Illyria called out to Spike. "If I try to jump such a great distance, the wyrm may evade past my ability to correct in mid-trajectory."

Spike shot a look over his shoulder at both of us, hesitated a moment, and nodded. After describing a wide arc in mid-air, he came out of it at top airspeed and on a course that would take him right past us, the dragon right behind him. I stood silent, not wanting to do anything that might upset Illyria's plan, and watched as she leapt across the empty space and landed astride the dragon's neck, just behind the head.

I took to the air then, wanting to be nearby to provide support to Illyria's effort if I could, and called to Buffy, "I think the dragon has become the hunted, not the hunter. See if you get an opening to heal Spike, and then go get Willow."

Buffy blinked in surprise, and then nodded, seeing the value in the suggestions. "What's the lair like?"

I could have kicked myself, forgetting to mention it first thing. "DARK! You'll need a light source — I needed Illyria to help lead me out."

Buffy considered this for a moment, or maybe it was Cordelia. "Switch weapons?" She hefted the spear sideways, looking at my sword.

"Um, why?"

With a grin, she drifted close, snatching the sword away by its hilt and tossing me the spear in exchange. With a moment's effort, the blade started to shine with silver radiance. "Mithril always has luminous potential. I have enough leftover glow-power to trigger it, even while fueling the water Lohr."

Cordy — it figured. "Okay, good luck!!"

"Hey!" Buffy called my attention to the action just in time to see the most important moments. Illyria had been riding the dragon's neck just behind its head, waiting for the beast to get tired of trying to buck and toss her away, and now she brought her hands up, fingers linked into a double fist, and brought them crashing down on the back of the dragon's head.

It had to be a horrible blow...the one that the rest of us hadn't been able to drive home with all of our magic weapons and energy bolts and special powers. The dragon screamed, in pure agony, and spasmed in mid-flight, desperate now to shake Illyria loose. As far as I could see, the demon didn't care — she had done what she came to do, and casually hopped off, to land on a rooftop more than forty feet below like she was jumping off of a bus. Feeling the need to do something to justify my presence, I shot off an energy bolt with as much power as I could muster, aiming for the place where the dragon's skull was probably already cracked. The additional howl of pain was pretty satisfying.

Faith flew down to join me, as Buffy tended to Spike's injuries. "I think it's mortal, now," she said hoarsely. It took me a second to realize that she was talking about the dragon's injuries: mortally wounded. "But if it lands in a frenzy like that, it could do a lot more damage before it finally croaks."

"Hmmm." I had to think about that. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"Someone needs to go and put it out of it's misery," Spike said, taking a deep breath. "Angel?"

"You offering?" I looked over, and he shook his head at me. Past him, I could see Buffy heading for the lair entrance, my sword tucked into her waistband.

"It's your job, *El Capitano*. You called it, back when we first saw the dragon down in the alley. Well, now you've got your chance."

I looked at Faith, but she shrugged slightly. "He's right. Well, not about the stuff in the alley maybe, because I wasn't there for that and don't know," she said. "But I think this is something you have to do."

I looked down at the dragon as it flew lower and thought about perching on a building well away from Illyria. Now that the tide of battle had apparently turned, my enthusiasm about killing a dragon had turned into reluctance. As evil and deadly as the creature might be, it was rare and beautiful, and dragons were pretty much an endangered species throughout the cosmos. How could I destroy one? And why did it have to be me?

But there wasn't really time to argue. "All right," I muttered, hefting Buffy's spear. Now it looked like a good thing for me that she had suggested this switch. Her weapon was more suitable for delivering a death blow than the sword would have been.

I flew down through the gray sky, orienting on the dragon, which heard me coming and turned around to face me, determined to at least go out fighting as hard as it could. I respected that. On the other hand, things would be easier if I could capitalize on the fracture that Illyria had already dealt it, which meant that I had to come at the thing's head the other way. A short series of energy bolts stunned it long enough for me to land standing up at the very far edge of the neck — for about a fifth of a second. It *really* didn't like me standing there, which I could understand considering that Illyria had been in pretty much the same position when she struck.

I almost fell off. I think I had to use a little 'flight' power to keep my balance, actually, and even so ended up sprawled with my arms and legs and chest landing on the rough scales, and getting scratched painfully here and there. Lost my grip on the spear, and it really *should* have fallen down, but it kinda bounced and I was just able to grab it with one hand.

The dragon tried a few more unpredictable maneuvers in the hope of jostling me loose, then apparently ran out of pep for such energetic tactics. I got laboriously up to my knees and one hand, then crawled a little further up as careful as I could, wincing at the fresh cuts that the hard scales were opening. Readied the spear...and felt, very oddly, that I had to say something. "Sorry, bud...not sure if you knew that you were working for the bad guys... maybe you liked it. But I gotta do this." And I plunged the shaft of the spear against the wound on the back of the dragon's head.

It went in, a long way, and I pulled it out a little bit, shifted it to the side and pushed in again. From the dragon's throat came a strangled kind of gasp, and then its body stiffened and stopped moving. That was it.

I wrenched the spear back out, or most of it. A remarkably large chunk of the point had broken off and presumably was still embedded within the dragon's brain — no time to get it back out now, and it'd be an incredibly messy task anyway. I took the shaft anyway, not sure why, and leapt for the open air, meeting up with the rest of the gang as they got organized, more or less. Illyria was standing on a rooftop nearby, and Spike was just taking off with Willow riding piggy-back style on his shoulders. He probably wouldn't be able to go at top speed like that, but it seemed like a better way than any other to get her back to the hotel, as long as our dear departed friends could keep the Lohr belts working.

"We've lost time," Willow mentioned, a worried tone in her voice, and not just because she was perched on top of a flying vampire. "If Wolfram and Hart arranged this diversion, they've probably also been scrambling to get every possible demon and vampire back to the Hyperion, ready to stop us if they can.

"I'm not sure; I don't hear much of an increase in the background noise," Illyria put in, running underneath us. "There is something planned, but I'm not sure how much of the horde it involves."

"Which means it might be something even worse," Faith muttered. "Damn, I didn't quite think that was possible."

"Well, we've come this far," I said. "And I assume that you girls are determined to stay in this no matter what? Spike and I knew that our lives were probably forfeit when we declared war on the circle, but the three of you — you have the other Slayers to think about, and the new Watchers network to build. Maybe you should just — "

"No," Buffy said, quietly but with that unutterable conviction in it. "Your team may have made their choices earlier, but I've made mine now. Wiping out the circle of the Black Thorn was a worthy goal, win or lose. So is trying to save you guys — save the whole city — from this army. And we have a chance to redouble on your victory now, to beat back the rising dark so far it won't know what hit it — thanks to Illyria. Live or die, I'm in."

"Me too," Faith chimed in almost instantly.

"What the hell?" Willow laughed nervously. "'Once more into the breach…'"

"'We few, we happy few,'" Spike recited dryly. I felt like I was missing something... especially as his eyes moved slightly to watch Buffy sidelong. It looked like a single tear would fall from one of those eyes, until he blinked it away. Must have been a bit of dust that he had flown into.

Pretty quickly we were back at the Hyperion hotel, and I fired several blasts of energy at the guardian warrior demons as soon as they were within sight, just as Buffy and Faith did the same -- I think all three of us had done it on a whim and none of us guessed that anybody else would do the same thing too. Spike couldn't easily raise his hand to fire with Willow still on his shoulders, but he narrowed his eyes and a tornado appeared, throwing the bodies of the demons around for good measure.

As soon as I touched down, there was a subtle blinking sensation and Doyle was no longer in the back of my mind — I looked around and saw that all of the ghosts had seperated now, which meant that the Lohr belts were useless. Well, we had gotten some good use out of them.

Illyria leapt down from a balcony and turned to me. "The talisman?" I extracted it from a pocket and handed it to her, and an intense red glow spread out from the pendant and homed in on Illyria's outline. She waved a hand, and there was a subtle shimmer in space, lagging a few centimeters behind her every motion. "Excellent."

"Okay, is there anything that we're forgetting?" Spike asked, his arms swinging slightly with restlessness.

"That this is gonna be the hardest part, where someone's most likely to bite it?" Faith muttered under her breath.

"Let's just go," Illyria suggested. Spike and Faith led the way to the hotel doors.

# VI

**I watched the fallen warrior demons carefully** while climbing awkwardly over the pile that their bodies made, ready to do a little quick stab work with the sword if any of them happened to move on their own, but none did. Something was feeling itchy in the base of my throat though. Somewhere near here would be the last and strongest line of defense, and considering what we had already been through, I had no idea what that would be or how we were supposed to fight it. Willow caught my eye and nodded slightly, then smiled a fierce little smile. Well, that was something we still had on our side at least, and the thought made me feel a little better.

I looked around, and realized that I couldn't see Wesley. I was about to ask Fred about him, and then I realized that he had probably popped in to merge with Illyria for a moment, to make sure that she knew what to do with the gateway.

"Oh, hey Angel — you'll need this back, I think." It was Buffy's voice. As I looked up at her I realized that she had thrown the mithril sword back to me, and I caught it awkwardly, then looked at the spear I was still carrying and back at her. Buffy shook her head, so I threw the spear shaft and broken point away, and Buffy pulled out a stake from one of her pockets. I shook my head silently, and she broke out laughing.

Spike and Faith opened the door to the hotel lobby first, and then did a bit of a double take at what they saw inside. I went up and took a look myself...and then I knew how they felt. For a second, it looked like the place was empty, but that might have been my eyes paying tricks on me in the darkness, combined with the fact that it wasn't at all what I expected to see.

There were a fair number of horrible beings, fiends, and goons inside, as I had expected, but they weren't milling out on the lobby floor, or waiting in perfect formation for us. Instead, they were mostly staying somewhere out of the way. Brrzhac demons standing behind the registration desk. Cthugans waiting solemnly in the doorways and the corridors beyond. Klensis beasts visible through the glassless windows there in one corner of the room. Vampire ninjas — Kobyame clan it looked like — were waiting on the stairway, weapons drawn. Up on the balcony, phalangoid demons, Khee Shaks and Konsoos, and a few revenants were waiting in eerie silence and stillness. A couple of Vartite fiends and about a dozen zombies were sitting on the floor in corners of the room, as if there was no other place for them.

And then, there was the dimensional gateway, a shimmering disk of rainbow colors down the far side of the lobby, blocking off the garden door. A few humanoid priests seemed to be attending to its workings, and a picked squad of shock troops *were* standing guard in formation immediately in front of it... Granok demons it looked like (ouch!), Tribulation mercenaries, and Tantrice.

"Well, if you're gonna come in, come on in," a familiar voice called out. "I mean, you look like you're expecting a fight — want us to try giving you one??"

I stepped through the doorway. "Maybe that'd be best, Lilah. I imagine you can probably guess why we've come."

"To shut down the gateway, yeah, yeah." She was stepping out into the middle of the lobby floor now, as the rest of the team gathered in behind us. "So... looks like the odds are about, umm, two hundred and fifty to six. How're you feeling?"

"Ready for a little action!" Spike called out.

"Hi, William," Lilah replied. "Think your boss is as confident as you are?"

"He's *not* my boss," Spike spat out automatically. "But yeah, he knows we can get this done."

"Methinks the boy doth protest too much," Lilah declared theatrically. "About not being your lackey that is, Angel. Well, okay, how do you wanna do this? Start it up slowly, or just come rushing at you as quickly as possible? Or we form a defensive formation and wait for you to come at it?"

"Ummm..." I thought about that, including wondering whether Lilah was playing some sort of a mind game with me here. But it didn't seem worth the bother to say anything other than my honest preference. "Yeah, a few of you at a time sounds good to me."

"You got it," Lilah replied, laughing. A half dozen of the demons broke off from their groups and approached us. Faith and Spike shrugged, and they, Illyria, and I attacked simultaneously, killing four of them. Five more started approaching to take their place.

We kept at it like that for a little while. Some of the demons that went up against us were not so easy to bump off, of course. The vampire ninjas and the cthugans for example, were tough fights, but still they came only a couple at a time, with the rest watching and waiting, which was really intensely creepy. Soon I realized that a few of the zombies and lesser monsters had approached, not to fight, but simply to helpfully drag away some of the bodies of our fallen enemies so that we didn't get surrounded by them.

We started to drift apart, to each have a little more room to fight in, since if the other guys were going to keep playing by the same rule they couldn't yet send in masses of enemies to surround each of us. A little bit after that happened, I realized that nobody was coming for me. Buffy, Faith, Spike, and Illyria were getting all of the action — I pulled a Klensis beast away from Faith and slapped it around for a bit before ripping off its fundament gland with my bare hands, which gave it about ten seconds in which to shudder and die. But the next demon I tried to engage actually backed away from me. "What the hell?"

"They're saving you. They've been told to."

I turned around and saw Lilah smirking at me. *Well fine, let her smirk all she wants, as long as she doesn't realize what we're really here for and shut down the gateway.* "Saving me? Why, I didn't realize that you cared so much."

Lilah shook her head. "No, I don't think you understand. Not saving you as in 'saving yout life.' Saving you as in 'letting you be until the V.I.D. who wants to kick your ass himself shows up."

Okay, I have to admit that idea was starting to frighten me. "V.I.D... that mean Very Important Demon?"

"Pretty much... though I don't want you to think I'm making light." She let out a long and slightly melodramatic sigh. "We had to clear most of the vampires, lesser demons, and assorted monsters *out* of the entire hotel — can you believe that? Only those who were considered worthy of seeing *him* remain." She made a soft little *sheesh*ing sound.

Power-freaked now, I was starting to get an idea what she was talking about. "Any idea when you expect him to drop by?" I checked the situation. Nobody seemed to be too heavily pressed. Willow was just hanging around near Buffy, not doing much of anything, probably conserving her strength, and nothing bothered her. Faith, Buffy, and Spike were each being kept busy, separately, by capable opponents, but not really endangered. It was as if they were humoring us — we'd obviously barged in here looking for a fight, so Wolfram & Hart was happy to supply us with one.

Illyria was being pressed a little more emphatically, with about four hulking yellow toad demons surrounding her and fighting as well as they could, but I got the sense that Illyria was stalling. She'd wait to make her move until the moment that it was least expected — which presumably would be after this Mister Big arrived. "Oh, any moment now," Lilah answered my question, shaking me out of idle thoughts.

*"Really?"* I looked towards the pulsing violet circle of light...it was practically expected at that moment. If I hadn't, Lilah would have wondered what was up.

On the other hand, if I hadn't, she probably wouldn't have chuckled. "No, no Angelino. You're going to miss it if you keep staring at *that* thing. Bascellicoze knows how to make an entrance." She laughed. "As in, his *own* entrance."

And then I saw it...a moment too late. In the empty space near the passageway that used to lead to my office, red lightning was starting to spark out of nowhere. "ILLYRIA!!" I shouted, and she knocked

the toad demons away from herself and came running, but it was too late. In mere seconds, a new figure stood there, dominating the entire scene.

Even though the shape it wore here on earth was probably a pale imitation of the malevolent splendor it was used to, I had to admit that the new arrival made an impressive sight. It was about fifteen feet tall, roughly hominid in outline but with soft, sleek tufts of gray fur all over its body, a mouthful of shiny teeth including four prominent points, perked triangular ears, and a long snout-like nose that tended to dominate its face. I stepped forward grimly.

"Should have realized that Ram or Hart wouldn't have been the ones to come. Wolf is the nastiest, the hunter and killer." A short breath. "And I've been wanting to meet one of you for a while now."

"Basil Lykos," Fred's ghost whispered, looking at the huge, towering shape and altering the stresses with which Lilah had said the name. "King of the wolves...and one of the firm's senor partners?"

"Well, now I am here," Lykos said, sneering his wolf's mouth a little. "After the lackeys here on earth screwed up one thing after another, I decided that finally I'd have to deal with the little snot of a 'ensouled vampire' myself. Shall we get to it?"

Buffy staked the ancient vampire who had been occupying her until Lykos' arrival and rushed towards me. "You wanna fight us?"

"No, actually, that doesn't appeal at the moment, my darling," he snorted, and then quickly began to speak in another language, a tongue that I had never heard before and yet somehow, possibly because of the magical properties of the conjuration he was speaking, I understood it perfectly. "Here and now do I call on thee: Angel, Liam, Angelus — three persons bound to one body, and challenge thee to defend thy cause on the field of honor. Thou and I, tooth against blade, hand to claw, for the fate of this earth and the resolution of prophecy. To this challenge I constrain and bind thee, by the word that shall not be spoken until all worlds come, finally, to their utter end." (There were no literal 'thee's and 'thou's I admit — it was a mystic language, but they seem to fit the tone of his meaning.)

I sucked in a breath. The binding spell that this wolf-king Senior Partner had laid on me was real enough...it probably wouldn't kill me to break it but it would take its toll one way or another, and probably in some fashion that would cripple me in the battle to come. Besides, I kind of liked the idea of settling my grudge against the Senior Partners by dueling one of them to the death. (Death was a little different for demons of such incalculable power I knew, but in a mystically mediated duel to the death, killing king Lykos would be a huge blow to Wolfram and Hart throughout the dimensions, even if it wasn't quite permanent.)

And I knew something else. Demons like the Senior Partners might be strong, but they weren't omnipotent. The Senior Partners would never have worked through lackeys on Earth, no matter how busy they might be on other worlds, if they weren't a little afraid of stepping into a dimension beyond their full control and getting killed there. I made up my mind and was about to take a step forward towards Lykos, when I heard Spike object. "Why are you challenging *him*? I'm the *real* vessel of destiny here!!" He sounded almost desperately sincere.

"Maybe some other day and in some other place, but *not* here and now, William the Spike," Lykos told him with a harsh laugh, and Spike just sat there, his last hopes cruelly dashed. I actually felt sorry for him, knowing what it would feel like myself to stand by and watch if the Senior Partner had chosen him.

Just then, Faith cried out "Willow!"

I turned to see what was happening now. Willow had bent over slightly, gasping in sudden exertion, and I realized that she had drawn on the reserves from the Dover coven. She whispered a spell under her breath...and beside me, more or less in the direction I had been about to step, a globe of softly glowing white light popped into existence.

"You can't go through with this, Angel," Buffy called out, the worry throbbing in her voice.

"I have to," I said softly, stepping forward to grab the white globe. As I had expected, it was a battle spell that Willow had prepared for me, knowing that this was the only thing that anyone could do to help me in this ritual combat. It wasn't considered to be illegal interference, I somehow knew; it was just preparing a tool and leaving it for me to find, before I had formally accepted the bond of battle. Lykos'

wolf eyes narrowed as he saw the energy absorbed into me, but he didn't object or even exclaim in surprise.

"I accept your challenge," I said simply. "Let the battle be joined." And Willow's spell took action then, somehow warping space and mass so that I was nearly as tall as Lykos was, and with momentum to match, though my motions and agility seemed unaffected. That violated the laws of physics, of course, but physics was temporarily out to lunch, here in this room that had been warped slightly out of reality by so many strange effects. Willow's spell was taking advantage of that, in the same way that the firm had when they set up the gateway here in the lobby.

Lykos was on me in an instant, the blunt part of his forearm (foreleg?) swinging towards my throat, his canine teeth bared. But I had expected something like this, and my reflexes seemed to be much sharper than usual... Was that Willow's booster or just the fact that I knew this was the most important duel I had ever been in? I let my body flow back before his attack, melting away with a useful aikido technique... never resist and never impede. In aikido it is the rudest thing possible to interfere with an enemy's motion...such as being in the space he wants his arm to move through. Once I was down on the floor, propped up by one elbow. I swept out a foot, trying to hook Lykos' legs and knock them out from under him, but he hopped over the attempt and backed away a little, smiling that he had taken my measure, and maybe looking forward to the next round of combat.

I flipped back up to my feet and eyed him warily for a moment, trying to figure out what he was about to do. It didn't seem like he was up to anything much — he was waiting for me to make my move. I thought about drawing the sword, but didn't. Against a really good opponent using a weapon can make you more predictable and thus be counterproductive.

I stepped forward towards the wolf demon, carefully, trying to see if he would leap to the attack once I was within a certain range. Nothing. He was just standing there, every fiber of his body tense and straining with energy, but held back.

Well, I had to try something that might surprise him. I broke into a run, noticing that Lykos was standing his ground, and bent down as if I was going into a cartwheel or handstand, but as soon as my hand touched the ground, I swung around that point of leverage as best I could, so as to kick into the wolf demon's side horizontally with both feet. It worked, well, in that I was able to connect, but he trapped one of my feet in between his torso and forelimb. Not a great situation for me. I kicked at his upper arm with my other foot, and that gave me enough leverage to flip my upper body off of the floor with my hands, so that I was flying up into the air, knocking him back...and my foot was free. I scrambled away...and realized that Illyria was moving towards the dimensional portal.

I had to keep anyone from realizing what she was really up to, so it was a calculated risk to even mention the portal. "You're going down, wolf boy," I muttered. "And then, that gateway is coming down too."

"Even if that's true, then what?" he spat. "You and your little friends can't fight your way out of a city under siege. My army will kill you all and then they will go on to destroy Los Angeles." He laughed. "And that's if you by some freak chance were able to take me out, which you won't. I'll win, and that will give me and mine enough influence over your world to make it ours."

"You talk big, shaggy," I taunted. "But hey, I'm not even bruised yet!"

"Increase the gate power!" Lilah called to the acolytes standing near it. "Full crossover intensity. They're going to try something."

It was hard to keep from laughing — that was exactly what I'd hoped Lilah would do. Anything to keep them from closing the gate on their own, prematurely, before Illyria could do her little trick.

Lykos, meanwhile, growled deep in his wolf's throat again, and let the claws on his hands extend until they looked like short swords, and slashed out at me with some of them. Figuring that a good defense is made of mithril, I drew my sword to fend them away.

I could see now that I'd taken the wrong tack a moment earlier. I couldn't win this fight by pushing an attack against the Senior Partner while he was calm, cool, and collected. He'd see a weak spot in my defenses and destroy me utterly. But King Lykos wasn't calm, cool, and collected, really — if he

were, he'd never have come. He'd come because he was angry, and that anger just might let me destroy him.

And so I hoped that what was going to happen next would *really* piss him off.

I concentrated for the next little bit on trying to perfect my defense as the wolf demon king launched ever more energetic attacks against me, knowing that it had to be frustrating all his minions to see them fail. Spin kick with his toe talons glinting brightly...fall back and roll away. He grabbed an axe that someone had dropped (using discovered tools was within dueling rules, remember) and tried to chop one of my arms off with it... I actually used a variant of the trick that Buffy had used on Angelus in the middle of that fight during the Acathla ritual, stopping the axe by catching the flat sides of the axe between my hands. He raked at me with arm claws and I blocked them with the edge of my sword.

And then it happened.

The demon broke off his attack to stare in disbelief at Illyria, calmly stepping into the middle of Wolfram and Hart's dimensional gateway, but not passing through. She must have simply pushed past the elite demons standing guard. Dimensional energy was flowing through her body, through Fred's old body, and beginning to change. I saw the patterns of light start to form circular and spiral patterns, as if they were getting surrounded by themselves. One of the tall cyclops was starting to grow hazy, not in outline, but in the details of his face and body...as if I was seeing him, and only him, through smoke — not the desk that was past him, not the floor that was at his feet. And then it wasn't just the cyclops, it was *all* of Wolfram and Hart's demons and monsters. Then the gateway and the monsters were all gone, just blinked out like someone had hit a button on a tv remote or a computer mouse to delete them.

It was me and Lykos, and the slayers and Spike and Willow, and the ghosts and Lilah. Illyria's body lay where the gateway had been — maybe alive, maybe dead; it was impossible to tell. Nobody else was left in the lobby. Probably no one else was left within several city blocks, unless there were local survivors that the horde hadn't killed 'just because.'

The demon king roared. "OMABBED!!" He kicked a hole in the floor in his rage. "That godsforsaken little demon bitch — I *knew* we should have found a way to kill her before this." He whirled to stare at Lilah. "This comes out of *your* hide, Morgan. Sixty-six point six *million* warriors transported to this puny little world on your say-so, and now they are lost. Well, a few probably got washed up somewhere, but it'll be worth more than they are to find and recover most of them. So I think that you will suffer in absolute agony one year for each and every one of them!"

Lykos reached out to point at Lilah, but before he had finished the gesture, Wesley had appeared out of nowhere (literally) in between them. Lilah disappeared in a soft blaze of light, but Lykos roared with annoyance and Wesley smiled with quiet triumph.

"She's safe from you now, and free of her quote unquote perpetuity contract," Wesley informed him. "The ones that I'm working for now have seen to that. 'Infinite in mercy' is the usual phrase. Now, unless I have it very wrong, you have a mortal duel that you're supposed to be concentrating on." He nodded to me slightly, just past the massive bulk of Lykos' body.

The wolf turned around, and scowled at me. "The way you're grinning, you must actually think Illyria's little trick has accomplished something, vampire. Once you're defeated, the kind of devastation I'll rain down on everything you think of as 'good' in this world will make Lilah's army look like a couple of little boys with toy tanks! And your friends will be the next ones to die horribly!"

"Well, there's that," I conceded, then whipped the sword towards his shoulder. He reached out his own arm and blocked it fiercely, but I had been expecting that, relaxed the shoulder, and didn't get hurt. At the same time, I rolled into him, so that our bodies were close together, and practically whispered into his perked-up ear: "On the other hand, we've been at this a little while already, and you haven't kicked my ass yet. So I'm starting to wonder if this is all 'call of the wild' bluster."

He roared, actually snapping at my nose with his teeth, but I was already rolling back away, sheathing the sword and shifting my weight slightly from foot to foot. The gloves were well and truly off now. I couldn't hope to keep up a perfect defense against the kind of attack that this demon, (who was in the top five of anybody I'd ever faced), was about to open up against me. But maybe, just maybe, I would have an opening for a devastating counterattack.

Even staying alive in that fight was far from easy. Lykos was truly a formidable opponent, well versed in the use of his natural weapons of tooth and claw, and obviously grandmaster in about a dozen different forms of martial arts, most of which were unknown anywhere on Earth. Despite Willow's spell altering my effective height and mass, he was still about half a head taller if he stood up straight, and his body blocks and power punches had about one third more impact in them than my own. I did what I could, and had my hopes up when I managed to take him in a jujitsu throw that would have given a hominid of any size a badly sprained ankle — but the wolf man's joints worked differently, and he didn't seem to be affected.

It was during that moment of disappointment that I let my guard down, and Lykos viciously slashed with one forepaw, his claws raking deep into my throat.

It was a bad wound; I knew it, even as I tried to fend off his attempts to leverage the scratch into an even more crippling bite. Generally, a vampire's physiology shrugs off what would be fairly deep wounds to a human, but that wasn't happening this time. Whether the wolf demon's claws were magic, or my quick-healing powers had simply been tapped out by the rest of the battles that I had been in today I wasn't sure. My neck was bleeding badly, and I could feel my strength running out with the blood.

Lykos let me struggle away, enjoying every drop and splatter of blood that landed on the tile. Was this it? Was it the beginning of the end? And how ironic was it, after dating a werewolf girl, that I'd finally be killed by a huge wolf demon?

Something tugged at me with the thought of Nina. Not that I cared for her and hoped she was safe in Mexico, though of course I did. And if what Lykos said was true, he'd win this fight and be able to bring the Apocalypse no matter what. Then she wouldn't be safe. But it really wasn't that.

It was something important, something that could mean the difference between victory and defeat right now. In a second I had found it, or thought that maybe I had. It seemed much smaller of a chance now that I was thinking of it directly, but maybe that was the only chance I had left.

When I started dating Nina, remembering the fact that her werewolf self had nearly killed me as a puppet, I'd asked Wesley for some kind of simple protection against werewolves or wolves, and he had given me a silver disc amulet marked with an ancient rune, that would confuse and stun magical wolves.

Would it *possibly* work against a Senior Partner, a demon king of all wolves?

Lykos was drawing near to me now, his teeth bared for the final attack, and I was starting to feel my strength ebb away. I had to try it. All that I needed was for the wolfman to flinch slightly from the amulet, and I would have my opening.

I thrust my left hand beneath my shirt, and couldn't find the amulet. Lykos roared and leapt, bearing me down to the ground, his teeth snapping at my shoulder. I tried to fend him off and look for the amulet at the same time, but it didn't work, so reluctantly I focused on the search, feeling the agony bloom all along the right side of my body as those cruel fangs tore into my flesh, mauling their way down towards my heart.

And then, of course, I found it. The silver disc was in my fingers, and I brought it out, nearly shoving it into Lykos' face. He flinched slightly, and impulsively I flipped the silver chain over the demon's own neck. For just a second, he seemed to be confused.

Then I grabbed at the mithril sword with what strength I could muster in my right arm and drove the blade straight through his heart.

King Lykos roared and his body was consumed with bright bluish-white flame, melting the sword almost instantly, and I scrambled back and beat at my own clothes where they had caught fire. For a second the wolf's eyes looked at mine, with incredible rage and hatred in them. And then he was entirely gone, leaving only a few scorch marks on the floor.

He wasn't dead for good, though; somehow I could tell that. The most powerful of demonkind always insisted on playing fast and loose with life and death in ways that we lesser folk could not even dream of. But that didn't matter to me so much. I had won the duel, at least, and in so doing, had beat back the entire Wolfram & Hart firm on this world. Their offices across the globe would be shutting down, for many decades at least. Willow's spell shut off and instantly blinked me back to my regular size without changing anything else.

I struggled up to my feet, and almost got knocked down again by Buffy. "You did it!"

"Yeah, I think so," I muttered tersely. I didn't want to mention my deepest fear, that having saved the world and won out, that I myself would not survive. My wounds were critical, and we had no more healing magic. But there was something else to check on first. "Illyria!"

She was alive, barely, but definitely at death's door as well. Her eyes looked up as all of us crowded close, but I think the only one that she saw was Wesley. "What do those words you said mean: 'infinite in mercy?'"

Wesley smiled tightly, ethereal tears streaming down his cheeks. "I don't think that I could explain it to you," he said softly. "But maybe, if you want, I can show you what they mean. Would you like that?"

A long pause, long enough that I was wondering if the demon would ever speak words again. Then, ever so softly, she replied, "I believe...that would be...acceptable."

Wesley shot a look over at the spirit of Fred, and she nodded, also smiling, also crying about as hard as she could at the same time. The four ghosts were all starting to glow softly, which I suddenly realized might mean their time to remain here was almost up. It had been the energy from the gateway that sustained them here on earth, someone had mentioned, and that was gone now. How long did we have?

Wesley reached out and laid an insubstantial hand on Illyria's face, and her eyes closed for the very last time. He shone brighter and brighter there, kneeling over her, and then winked out. Was he conveying the demon's spirit to meet with the Powers that Be? What a meeting that would be!

My knees buckled, and I only just managed to get myself sitting on one of the steps up next to the garden door instead of sprawling out embarrassingly on the floor. "Well, if Lilah and Illyria qualify for going to heaven," I muttered, "then I hope that I can get in. All but my vampire side, at least. Angelus can finally go to hell I guess, and good riddance."

"No!" Buffy exclaimed, squatting close to me. "Angel, you're not going to...to die. You *can't* die!"

"There's an awful lot of my blood on the floor that says different."

"You can't!" she insisted, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "Not after...after everything you've done, everything you've given up, everything you've risked, everything you've accomplished. Not after everything that I did to save your incredibly cute ass!"

"I'm not sure that all of that always makes a difference," I said, lifting up an arm with difficulty towards hers. "I always knew that many people might have to die to win out, that the good guys don't always make it to the end. And you've accomplished so much, by being here. You and the rest, without you guys we could never have vanquished the horde, or smacked Wolfram and Hart down *damn* good, or...or saved Spike and Gunn." I took a deep, ragged breath. "And I think when I'm gone, you and Spike are gonna figure things out. You're cookies now, baby, and he's chocolate milk or something the hell like that. He's learned a lot, hanging out with me for a year... He's good enough for you, and that's about the highest compliment I could ever think of."

"You're delirious, Angel," she said, with some justification. "Just...just hang on, okay. We'll be able to heal your wounds somehow, just as long as you..."

"There isn't enough time for that," Cordelia said softly. Buffy looked up at her, and now the tears flowed like a miniature stream from each of her eyes.

"God, no!! Buffy, honey, I didn't mean to put it like that. We can't heal Angel, but we can do something better. I won the privilege of being the one to do this, but I didn't expect the scene to be nearly like it is. "

"I... I don't understand," Buffy and I said in unison, and looked at each other, and laughed without much in the way of real mirth.

"That scroll that the circle of the black thorn made you sign, keeping you from getting the reward of your destiny," Fred said, a big grin on her face. "They took it through the dimensional gateway here, to a holding dimension for safe keeping."

I didn't understand what that meant. I was starting to lose my grip on the whole situation, but I heard Buffy say "But that...hat means..."

"It doesn't exist any more," Cordelia said. "And I am now honored to be the vessel from which destiny flows, or something like that. Angel... Angel?"

Something changed, like I had taken a huge fall and landed very hard and joltingly. The first thing I noticed was the pulse pounding in my throat and my ears. The second thing was that my neck and my shoulder didn't seem to be hurt anymore. The third thing I noticed was that Buffy smelled really nice.

Wait a second...*pulse pounding??*

I got up and looked around myself. We were still in the Hyperion lobby, with Illyria's body lying unmoving a little way off, and the scorch marks where Lykos had been vanquished were maybe fifteen feet beyond. But everything else seemed to be slightly different.

I was looking at the world through human eyes now. Living eyes.

I spun around to face Buffy, and she was sitting in an awkward half-kneel, looking up at me with utter shock. "You're...you're human!"

"Damn!" Spike swore, and the predictable-ness of that response made me laugh, and swing Buffy up in my arms, hugging her.

"I'm alive, and I'm human," I repeated out loud, just savoring the words. "I never thought it would happen for real, but it did."

"And the world is saved, or at least safer," Doyle added pointedly. "So that you don't really need to worry about retiring as a Champion for a little while, and just enjoy your reward. There are others to carry on."

"Like you," Fred told Spike. "You're a hero now, and a champion, but you haven't earned this like Angel did. Maybe one day... But you've got a lot of work to do before that day ever comes."

"And with that," Cordelia said a little sadly, "We really do have to go now." She took a deep breath and grinned at me. "Shanshu, baby! You did it!"

"Couldn't have done it without you — any of you," I said. "Make sure to pass that along to Wesley."

"He knows," Fred assured me. "But I'll tell him you said so."

The three remaining ghosts faded away, and Buffy grinned at me teasingly. "So, you've saved the world and now you're human. What do you want to do now? I understand there's a cute blonde werewolf girl waiting for you in Cabo san Lucas."

That bit hard at my suddenly human heart. But... "No, I can't go and see Nina now. With the news reports, she may think that I died here. But, well, in a way I did. To her, I was the mysterious handsome vampire CEO, and all of that is gone now." I brushed a bit of hair away from Buffy's forehead and looked deep into her beautiful eyes. "But I think that you always saw me as more than a vampire, maybe, because you fell for me before you knew that I was that. You always saw the man that I could be, that I have the chance to be now. Am I right??"

She beamed for a second, and kissed me sweetly on the mouth. "Well, the slayer and vampire thing had its odd lure, but yeah. I really do think you're right." She sighed. "On the other hand, I'm not so sure I'm cookies yet, Angel."

I blushed in mortification, remembering the things that I had babbled to her when I thought I was dying. "Well then, what do you want to do?"

She smiled. "I want you to come and see Rome with me. I'm not sure if that'll lead to anything, but I want to spend time with you that has nothing to do with fighting evil monsters. I want to show you my world, the world of the sunlight and the flowers and the white puffy clouds. Come to Rome, Angel. If anything else needs to be figured out, we'll think about it there."

"I'll come," I assured her, starting to feel tears flowing myself. She reached up on tiptoes, pushing me down gently, and kissed my eyes dry.

"Umm... Any idea how we get there?"

Buffy led the way out of the hotel. "Umm... Well, we're probably walking a ways, until we get somewhere that the horde didn't ravage so much and we can catch a taxi. The charter jet is waiting at an

airfield well outside the city — they dropped us at the Wolfram and Hart offices on parachute and continued on."

"Oh, joy." We led the way down the ruined street, hand in hand, Willow following a little way behind. I was starting to wonder if sometime I could drop by and see Connor. I had been plucked out of my old existence and handed a new one in very much the same way it had been done for him. Maybe we could start to get to know each other again. But Buffy came first.

"Say, Spike, have you ever wanted to go to Cleveland?" Faith asked, as they brought up the rear. "Wolfram and Hart didn't have anything to do with the Hellmouth II, so you can probably build up some good champion cred around there."

"Oh, wait a second," Buffy realized. "We have to go back to the retreat, and check on all of our friends and such. Umm... Do you remember where the portal that Wesley led us to was? Can we do an outgoing from there?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said, and kissed her — just because. "I think it was down this side street..."

# *Epilogue*

**"So what do you think?"** she asked, and I recognized the feel of Buffy's hair brushing against the back of my arm immediately. Everything felt more *real* now that I was...well, now that I was all the way alive. Maybe I was just imagining it, but...

I turned around, looking into Buffy's face, staring at those deep, slate-green eyes for a moment. And then I draped one arm comfortably around her shoulders and turned back east, facing the rolling valleys and the oncoming dawn, one hand on the railing. "I think it looks like it's going to be the most beautiful morning I could ever imagine."

She smiled. "Good answer. But you can't smell the sun before you see it anymore, can you?" I shook my head, surprised by the memory. I had told her about that...Christmas morning, five and a half years ago now. I had been trying to kill myself, tormented by a diabolical phantom, and my life had been saved when a freak California snowstorm had blocked out the morning sunlight so that it couldn't kill me. A freak snowstorm... that I later thought might have been sent by the Powers That Be to make sure I would survive to carry on their work here in Los Angeles.

It had been Buffy's idea to come up to the top of a tall building and watch the sunrise — and it turned out that the highest one in the city, the US Bank Tower, was in a region where the horde had only done slight damage here and there — the tower itself was almost untouched. Since there was no observation deck, we had snuck up to the roof, next to the helipad, to say our goodbyes.

I've seen the sun come up a few times over the past year — one advantage of working for Wolfram and Hart was that the glass in their office was specially designed so that sunlight shining through it would not hurt vampires. "Necro-tempered" was the term that was always used, whatever that meant. But it was completely different to see the first little bit of sun poke above the horizon and realize that there was nothing at all between me and it but air and space, that the light was hitting human skin and human eyes—

Buffy's cell phone beeped at her. She rolled her eyes slightly as I shot her a look, pulling the infernal device out of some mysterious pocket. But she didn't bring the speaker up to her ear, just read some kind of mail off of the tiny little screen.

"News is *still* coming in," she announced to the group at large. "As far as anybody can tell, every Wolfram and Hart branch office across the planet started to crumble and wreck itself, at the same time that Angel stuck his sword through Lykos' heart. Preliminary reports from nearby dimensions indicate that the Firm is pulling out and consolidating in more distant realms."

"Heading for the 'high ground' I'd bet," Gunn said, chuckling slightly — and holding his side regretfully with a momentary pain. "The typically darker and more evil worlds, the hell-planes and what have you."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Natasha put in. Although Spike still couldn't come up here without bursting into flames, and Faith and Willow had declined to attend, the two of them, Groo, Aaron, and Virginia had been more than happy to celebrate our victory. Come to think of it... I tucked a few strands of Buffy's hair behind her ear with a simple caress, smiled at her, and went over to have a word with Virginia, who was standing off by herself just slightly.

"I wish I knew of a good enough way to thank you," I told her. "None of this would be possible without you opening the sanctuary to us, and..."

"You really don't need to," she insisted. "After the rebuilding starts, this city will be a much safer place for the people that I care about. That's a reward in and of itself. Plus... Well, I got a chance to see Wesley one last time, and to know that he's okay." She took a deep breath. "It's not a chance that many people get."

"I know," I said softly. "He's very proud of you, I think."

Virginia shook her head, red curls shifting as she moved. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the last time he saw you, you had lived a very sheltered life for a long time, and you were frightened. For him. It's understandable, and a lot of people stay frightened, to a certain extent, all of their lives. But you've matured so much in just a few years, not just in your confidence, but your involvement in the world around you. You're reaching out to help people who desperately need a kind of order and structure in their lives — like Mattasee."

"Yeah, I guess I am." She smiled. "Any idea what's next for you, after your little Roman holiday??"

"Not really," I admitted, "but I suspect that something interesting will turn up." I looked over at Buffy, who was talking with Natasha and Groo now, and it felt like my heart would burst out of its rib cage. "Excuse me."

"Of course," Virginia said softly, as I crossed over to join them.

"...really pleased to have you back on full-time, for real," Buffy was saying to Natasha as I got there, and I shot her a questioning look. "Natasha's agreed to sign up for re-attached duty, as a full Watcher. Dana's Watcher," she explained to me.

"She has a lot of practice looking after psychotic teenagers," Groo added, with a sly, joking smile.

"That's great," I said, shaking Natasha's hand in an odd instinct of congratulation. "What about Aaron? Are you going to keep hanging around this area??"

"No, we've talked it over with Aaron, and he really doesn't need me watching over him like a mother hen," she replied. "He understands about as much as I can teach him about his gift and what to do about it. I'm not sure that the Powers will have much to say to him for a little while, at that." She patted Groo's arm. "And we're going to be going down to South America and working with Willow and Kennedy for a little while."

"Cool, I guess," I decided.

"What about you, Gunn?" Aaron put in. "Heading for any glamorous distant destination?"

"Naw, naw, homeboy's goin' back to the hood, 'yo," Gunn shot back. "My old haunts took quite a beating from the horde, and there's plenty of work to be done. Probably going to get back in touch with the old friends, and Anne." He laughed. "Of course, there'll be a lot of money that has to be raised, and Wolfram and Hart's legal know-how could help with that, as long as it doesn't go poof on me again."

"Anything in a good cause," Buffy replied, and then caught sight of something. We all watched as a young man in a uniform came out of the stairway door, wondering if he was going to tell us that we shouldn't be up here.

As it turned out, he didn't have that in mind at all. "Angel, Buffy, Gunn?"

Neither of them spoke up, so I paused a moment and said, "Um, I'm Angel, why? Do I know you?"

"Not at all, sir, but I have a telegram for you." He must have been able to recognize the shock on my face — belatedly I recognized the uniform as that of a delivery company. "From a..." He pulled out the envelope and considered the print on it. "A Krevlurn Swahth?"

Gunn started laughing again, and then coughing, and forced himself to quiet down. "You've got to be joking," I complained to no one in particular.

The delivery guy must have thought I was saying it to him. "Not at all, sir. If you could please sign here for the message?" Shrugging, I looked at all the fine print on the guy's clipboard, but eventually signed and let him disappear back into the tower, after putting the envelope firmly in my hands. I opened it, pulled out a piece of paper, and began to read out loud.

"Congratulations, peach puff. I knew that you'd get the job done, but I wasn't sure that I'd be able to make it through the crossfire — hence the quick vamoose. If there was ever a champion vampire with a

soul who deserved it, that would be you, and definitely not Spike no matter how cute he is when he starts to pout.

"So again, sorry that I couldn't make your little welcome back to humanity party in person, but I have a sneaking suspicion that we'll meet again — I've always wanted to do a European tour, and maybe this time my promoter won't be a crook like the Vegas guy. Ohh — and don't even bother asking how I knew that you'd be exactly here, right now. A guy's gotta be able to keep a few secrets up his sleeve, doesn't he??

"With all my love and best wishes, Lorne."

There was a bit of a silent moment after that, and then Buffy nudged me softly. "We'd better get going sweetie — the plane'll be ready to take off soon."

I nodded, and said quick final goodbyes to everyone. As we started back down the stairs, I had to ask. "Did you really just call me sweetie?"

"Yeah, I guess I did," she admitted simply.

"I liked the way it sounded," I told her, then added, "darling" just to try it out.

That sounded even better.

~ The End ~